

THE SELECTED NOVELS OF
W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

VOL. II

By W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

LIZA OF LAMBETH
MRS. CRADDOCK
THE MERRY-GO-ROUND
THE EXPLORER
THE MAGICIAN
THE MOON AND SIXPENCE
OF HUMAN BONDAGE
THE TREMBLING OF A LEAF
ON A CHINESE SCREEN
THE PAINTED VEIL
THE CASUARINA TREE
ASHENDEN
THE GENTLEMAN IN THE PARLOUR
CAKES AND ALE
THE FIRST PERSON SINGULAR
THE NARROW CORNER
AH KING
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CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY
THE MIXTURE AS BEFORE
BOOKS AND YOU
UP AT THE VILLA
STRICTLY PERSONAL
THE RAZOR'S EDGE
THEN AND NOW
HERE AND THERE (*Collection of Short Stories*)
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VOL. II

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THE PAINTED VEIL (*177 pages*)

Preface

The Moon and Sixpence is not, of course, a life of Paul Gauguin in the form of fiction. It is founded on what I had heard about him, but I used only the main facts of his story and for the rest trusted to such gifts of invention as I was fortunate enough to possess. Fifty years ago, in 1904 to be precise, I spent a year in Paris. I had been living in London for some years, doing the same sort of things month after month, and I found myself tired of the quiet and orderliness of my daily round. I had had enough of the week-end visits to the houses of the rich and the grand and the interminable dinners in Mayfair that I was bidden to. I did not want to go to any more dances. I was growing old (I thought) and the precious years were slipping unprofitably through my fingers. I decided to make a break. I had a friend, a painter, now President of the Royal Academy, who lived on the left bank of the Seine and the life in the Latin Quarter that he described to me when we sometimes met very much took my fancy. I decided to live in Paris for a while. I had known it as a child and, even after my parents' death which sent me to England, I had often stayed there; but the Paris I knew was the Paris of the Champs Élysées and the Boulevards. The Paris I went to then was new to me. As soon as I arrived I took an apartment of three small rooms near the Lion de Belfort, on the fifth floor, with a spacious view over a cemetery. Montparnasse had at that time very much the air of a provincial town, which even now when you look at it with the eyes of fancy it still charmingly wears. The great handsome streets that have been cut through it did not exist and the Boulevard Raspail was only half built. A horse tram ran down the Rue de Rennes. The night life which for a period made it the haunt of pleasure seekers, foreign and native, had not set in. The Dome, the Rotonde, the Closerie des Lilas were there, but their patrons were the inhabitants of the Quarter. To go over to the other side of the river, in a bus drawn by three horses, was an excursion. It was rarely made except to go to the Louvre or the Salon and now and then to the theatre. As a rule if one wanted to see a show one went to the

Gaîtés Montparnasse. In the Rue de Rennes there were some good shops, but in the side-streets there were the same little smelly grubby shops that had been there for a century.

Life on the Montparnasse was intense, for art seemed the most important thing in the world and, since everyone was young, love, a light love for the most part, without consequence, added zest to it, but life notwithstanding was quiet, plain and easy. It was also uncommonly cheap. That was a great advantage to me, since I was very poor. However busy one was, there was ample leisure. The air seemed fresher than in the Paris of the Boulevards and the crowd less insistent. When I look back my most vivid recollection is of a feeling of anticipation that danced in one's heart like dust in a sunbeam. It was then that I became aware of Cézanne, van Gogh and Gauguin. Cézanne was by far the greater artist, but Gauguin has a singular appeal to the man of letters. Though I do not now so much admire his pictures I still see how much there is in them to excite the literary imagination. I met men who had known him and worked with him at Pont-Avon. I heard much about him. It occurred to me that there was in what I was told the subject of a novel and I read the only life of him that at that moment had appeared. I did no more about it. I kept the idea in my mind. I kept it for over ten years. At last I had the opportunity to go to Tahiti and with the novel that had occupied my reveries off and on for so long I went there with the definite intention of finding out whatever else I could of Gauguin's life. I came across a number of persons who had been more or less closely connected with him. They were very ready to talk. Presently I found myself as ready to write the novel I had so long contemplated as one can be before one sits down to set pen to paper.

But no novelist can know everything. Sometimes he has to deal with circumstances that are completely outside his own experience. I knew that Gauguin had passed some time in Marseilles in dire poverty and it was convenient for me to have Charles Strickland, my hero, undergo the same hardships as he had. I knew something of the less reputable quarters of Marseilles, but not exactly how a man out of work would go about it to keep himself from starving. I read an interesting book of travel by Harry Franck, called *A Vagabond Journey Round the World*, and there found the very facts I needed. I used them. In a novel it would be absurd to put the source from which you obtain information, it would destroy the illusion you seek to create that

your narrative is a true relation of facts; but I gave the reader a hint that I had not invented these facts myself by telling the reader of my suspicion that Captain Nichols, who in the novel told them to me as having happened to himself, had found them in the pages of a magazine. This was apparently not enough, for an angry gentleman wrote a long article condemning my reprehensible behaviour. It left me calm. I think books of facts are a legitimate quarry for the imaginative writer. I see no more reason why he should not make use of them than of the incidents that are told him in a club smoking-room or at the bar of a public-house. But I gladly take this opportunity to acknowledge my debt to Harry Franck.

The characters of fiction are strange fish. They come into your mind. They grow. They acquire suitable characteristics. An environment surrounds them. You think of them now and again. Sometimes they become an obsession so that you can think of nothing else. Then you write of them and for you they cease to be. It is odd that someone who has occupied a place, often only in the background of your thoughts, but sometimes in the very centre of them, who then perhaps for months has lived with you all the waking hours of the day and often in your dreams, should slip your consciousness so completely that you can remember neither the name you gave him nor what he looked like. You may even forget that he ever existed. But on occasion it doesn't happen like that. A character whom you thought you had done with, a character to whom you had given small heed, does not vanish into oblivion. You find yourself thinking of him again. It may be exasperating, for you have had your will of him and he is no longer of use to you. What is the good of his forcing his presence on you? He is a gate-crasher whom you do not want at your party. He is eating the food and drinking the wine prepared for others. You have no room for him. You must concern yourself with the people who are more important to you. But does he care? Unmindful of the decent sepulchre you have prepared for him, he goes on living obstinately; indeed he betrays an uncanny activity, and one day to your surprise he has forced his way to the forefront of your thoughts and you cannot help but give him your attention.

The reader of *The Narrow Corner* will find Dr. Saunders in a brief sketch in *On a Chinese Screen*. This was a little book made up of

the notes I made during a sojourn of some months in China thirty years ago. Dr. Saunders was devised to act his part in a very short story called *The Stranger*. I had space there to draw him but in a few lines and I never expected to think of him again. There was no reason why he, rather than any of the many persons who made an appearance in that book, should go on living. He took the matter into his own hands. Some critics who have been sufficiently interested in me to write about my books have stated that in Dr. Saunders I drew a portrait of myself. I don't know how they got such a queer idea in their heads. It is true that I lent him one or two of my own experiences. But that is quite another matter. When a novelist has had an experience that will fit in with the characteristics of a creature of his invention he looks upon it as a bit of luck and makes haste to use it. I founded Dr. Saunders on a medical student I had known when I was myself one and whom I continued to know till he died forty years later. He was never a good doctor, but he had gaiety, a great sense of humour, a pleasant cynicism and not a little unscrupulousness. He was a most pleasant companion.

Captain Nichols was introduced to the reader in *The Moon and Sixpence*. He was suggested by a beachcomber I met in the South Seas. He was a very pretty rascal, but he took my fancy. He had smuggled guns into South America and opium into China. He had been engaged in the blackbird business in the Solomon Islands and showed a scar on his forehead as the result of a wound some scoundrelly nigger had given him who did not understand his philanthropic intentions. Captain Nichols played but a minor part in *The Moon and Sixpence*, but soon after I finished that book I became aware that I was not finished with him. I went on thinking about him and when the manuscript came back from the typist and I was correcting errors, I was struck by an incident which in the course of conversation he had related to me and which I had set down as nearly as I could in his own words. It was an account of a long cruise he had taken in the Eastern seas under peculiar circumstances. It occupied only a page of my handwriting. As I read it over then it was borne in upon me that here was the idea for a novel and the more I thought of it the more I liked it. By the time the proofs of *The Moon and Sixpence* reached me I had made up my mind to write it and so cut out the passage in question. It was on the foundation of that single page that twelve years later I wrote *The Narrow Corner*.

The Painted Veil to the best of my belief is the only novel I have written in which I started from a story rather than from a character. It is difficult to explain the relation between character and plot. You cannot very well think of a character in the void; the moment you think of him you think of him in some situation, doing something; so that the character and, though tentatively and in a confused fashion, at least the principle motives of his activity seem to be the result of a simultaneous act of the imagination. But in this case the characters were devised to fit the story I gradually evolved; they were constructed from persons I had long known in different circumstances. I had so elaborated them that not one of them guessed that he had served as my model.

The story was suggested by the words addressed to Dante by one of the souls in pain when with Virgil to guide him he was led through the place of expiation which is Purgatory. They run in translation as follows:

"Pray, when you are returned to the world, and rested from the long journey," followed the third spirit on the second, "remember, me, who am Pia. Siena made me, Maremma unmade me: this he knows who after betrothal espoused me with his ring."

How these few lines happened to give me an idea for a novel I will now relate.

I was a student at St. Thomas's Hospital and the Easter vacation gave me six weeks to myself. With my clothes in a gladstone bag and twenty pounds in my pocket I set out for Florence. I took a room in the Via Laura, from the window of which I could see the lovely dome of the Cathedral, in the apartment of a widow lady, who offered me board and lodging (after a good deal of haggling) for four lire a day. This was roughly three shillings. I'm afraid she didn't make a very good thing out of it, since my appetite was enormous and I could devour a mountain of macaroni without inconvenience. She had a vineyard in the Tuscan hills and my recollection is that the chianti she got from it was the best I have ever drunk in Italy. Her daughter gave me Italian lessons. She seemed to me of mature age, but I don't suppose she was more than twenty-six. She had had trouble. Her betrothed, an officer, had been killed in Abyssinia and she was consecrated to virginity. It was an understood thing that on her mother's death (a buxom, grey-haired, jovial lady who did not mean to die a day before the dear Lord saw fit) Ersilia would become a nun. She took my lessons seriously and when I was stupid or inattentive rapped me

over the knuckles with a black ruler. I should have been indignant at being treated like a child if it had not reminded me of the old-fashioned pedagogue I had read of in books and so made me laugh.

I had already read the *Inferno* (with the help of a translation, but conscientiously looking out in the dictionary the words I didn't know), so with Ersilia I started on the *Purgatorio*. When we came to the passage I have quoted above she told me that Pia was a gentlewoman of Siena whose husband, suspecting her of adultery and afraid on account of her family to put her to death, took her to his castle in the Maremma the noxious vapours of which he was confident would soon do the trick; but she took so long to die that he grew impatient and had her thrown out of a window. I don't know where Ersilia learnt all this, the note in my own Dante was less circumstantial, but the story caught my imagination. I turned it over in my mind and for many years from time to time would brood over it for two or three days. But it was one among many subjects that occupied my fancy and for long periods I forgot it. Of course I saw it as a modern story and I couldn't for the life of me think of a situation in the world of to-day in which such events might plausibly happen. In 1920 I went to China. I took long journeys into the interior. I found there the setting and the circumstances which very well suited me. I was at last in a position to write the novel I had carried about in my mind for six and twenty years.

THE MOON AND SIXPENCE

The Moon and Sixpence

CHAPTER I

I CONFESS that when first I made acquaintance with Charles Strickland I never for a moment discerned that there was in him anything out of the ordinary. Yet now few will be found to deny his greatness. I do not speak of that greatness which is achieved by the fortunate politician or the successful soldier; that is a quality which belongs to the place he occupies rather than to the man; and a change of circumstances reduces it to very discreet proportions. The Prime Minister out of office is seen, too often, to have been but a pompous rhetorician, and the General without an army is but the tame hero of a market town. The greatness of Charles Strickland was authentic. It may be that you do not like his art, but at all events you can hardly refuse it the tribute of your interest. He disturbs and arrests. The time has passed when he was an object of ridicule, and it is no longer a mark of eccentricity to defend or of perversity to extol him. His faults are accepted as the necessary complement to his merits. It is still possible to discuss his place in art, and the adulation of his admirers is perhaps no less capricious than the disparagement of his detractors; but one thing can never be doubtful, and that is that he had genius. To my mind the most interesting thing in art is the personality of the artist; and if that is singular, I am willing to excuse a thousand faults. I suppose Velasquez was a better painter than El Greco, but custom stales one's admiration for him: the Cretan, sensual and tragic, proffers the mystery of his soul like a standing sacrifice. The artist, painter, poet, or musician, by his decoration, sublime or beautiful, satisfies the aesthetic sense; but that is akin to the sexual instinct, and shares its barbarity: he lays before you also the greater gift of himself. To pursue his secret has something of the fascination of a detective story. It is a riddle which shares with the universe the merit of having no answer. The most insignificant of Strickland's works suggests a personality which is strange, tormented, and complex; and it is this surely which prevents even those who do not like his pictures from being indifferent to them;

it is this which has excited so curious an interest in his life and character.

It was not till four years after Strickland's death that Maurice Huret wrote that article in the *Mercure de France* which rescued the unknown painter from oblivion and blazed the trail which succeeding writers, with more or less docility, have followed. For a long time no critic has enjoyed in France a more incontestable authority, and it was impossible not to be impressed by the claims he made; they seemed extravagant; but later judgments have confirmed his estimate, and the reputation of Charles Strickland is now firmly established on the lines which he laid down. The rise of this reputation is one of the most romantic incidents in the history of art. But I do not propose to deal with Charles Strickland's work except in so far as it touches upon his character. I cannot agree with the painters who claim superciliously that the layman can understand nothing of painting, and that he can best show his appreciation of their works by silence and a cheque-book. It is a grotesque misapprehension which sees in art no more than a craft comprehensible perfectly only to the craftsman; art is a manifestation of emotion, and emotion speaks a language that all may understand. But I will allow that the critic who has not a practical knowledge of technique is seldom able to say anything on the subject of real value, and my ignorance of painting is extreme. Fortunately, there is no need for me to risk the adventure, since my friend Mr. Edward Leggatt, an able writer as well as an admirable painter, has exhaustively discussed Charles Strickland's work in a little book* which is a charming example of a style, for the most part, less happily cultivated in England than in France.

Maurice Huret in his famous article gave an outline of Charles Strickland's life which was well calculated to whet the appetites of the inquiring. With his disinterested passion for art, he had a real desire to call the attention of the wise to a talent which was in the highest degree original; but he was too good a journalist to be unaware that the "human interest" would enable him more easily to effect his purpose. And when such as had come in contact with Strickland in the past, writers who had known him in London, painters who had met him in the cafés of Montmartre, discovered to their amazement that where they had seen but an unsuccessful artist, like another, authentic genius had rubbed shoulders with

* "A Modern Artist: Notes on the Work of Charles Strickland," by Edward Leggatt, A.R.H.A. Martin Secker, 1917.

them, there began to appear in the magazines of France and America a succession of articles, the reminiscences of one, the appreciation of another, which added to Strickland's notoriety, and fed without satisfying the curiosity of the public. The subject was grateful, and the industrious Weitbrecht-Rotholz in his imposing monograph* has been able to give a remarkable list of authorities.

The faculty for myth is innate in the human race. It seizes with avidity upon any incidents, surprising or mysterious, in the career of those who have at all distinguished themselves from their fellows, and invents a legend to which it then attaches a fanatical belief. It is the protest of romance against the commonplace of life. The incidents of the legend become the hero's surest passport to immortality. The ironic philosopher reflects with a smile that Sir Walter Raleigh is more safely enshrined in the memory of mankind because he set his cloak for the Virgin Queen to walk on than because he carried the English name to undiscovered countries. Charles Strickland lived obscurely. He made enemies rather than friends. It is not strange, then, that those who wrote of him should have eked out their scanty recollections with a lively fancy, and it is evident that there was enough in the little that was known of him to give opportunity to the romantic scribe; there was much in his life which was strange and terrible, in his character something outrageous, and in his fate not a little that was pathetic. In due course a legend arose of such circumstantiality that the wise historian would hesitate to attack it.

But a wise historian is precisely what the Rev. Robert Strickland is not. He wrote his biography† avowedly to "remove certain misconceptions which had gained currency" in regard to the later part of his father's life, and which had "caused considerable pain to persons still living". It is obvious that there was much in the commonly received account of Strickland's life to embarrass a respectable family. I have read this work with a good deal of amusement, and upon this I congratulate myself, since it is colourless and dull. Mr. Strickland has drawn the portrait of an excellent husband and father, a man of kindly temper, industrious habits, and moral disposition. The modern clergyman has

* "Karl Strickland: sein Leben und seine Kunst," by Hugo Weitbrecht-Rotholz, Ph.D. Schwingel und Hanisch. Leipzig, 1914.

† "Strickland: The Man and His Work," by his son, Robert Strickland. Wm. Heinemann, 1913.

acquired in his study of the science which I believe is called exegesis an astonishing facility for explaining things away, but the subtlety with which the Rev. Robert Strickland has "interpreted" all the facts in his father's life which a dutiful son might find it inconvenient to remember must surely lead him in the fullness of time to the highest dignities of the Church. I see already his muscular calves encased in the gaiters episcopal. It was a hazardous though maybe a gallant thing to do, since it is probable that the legend commonly received has had no small share in the growth of Strickland's reputation; for there are many who have been attracted to his art by the detestation in which they held his character or the compassion with which they regarded his death; and the son's well-meaning efforts threw a singular chill upon the father's admirers. It is due to no accident that when one of his most important works, *The Woman of Samaria*,* was sold at Christie's shortly after the discussion which followed the publication of Mr. Strickland's biography, it fetched £235 less than it had done nine months before, when it was bought by the distinguished collector whose sudden death had brought it once more under the hammer. Perhaps Charles Strickland's power and originality would scarcely have sufficed to turn the scale if the remarkable mythopœic faculty of mankind had not brushed aside with impatience a story which disappointed all its craving for the extraordinary. And presently Dr. Weitbrecht-Rotholz produced the work which finally set at rest the misgivings of all lovers of art.

Dr. Weitbrecht-Rotholz belongs to that school of historians which believes that human nature is not only about as bad as it can be, but a great deal worse; and certainly the reader is safer of entertainment in their hands than in those of the writers who take a malicious pleasure in representing the great figures of romance as patterns of the domestic virtues. For my part, I should be sorry to think that there was nothing between Antony and Cleopatra but an economic situation; and it will require a great deal more evidence than is ever likely to be available, thank God, to persuade me that Tiberius was as blameless a monarch as King George V. Dr. Weitbrecht-Rotholz has dealt in such terms with the Rev. Robert Strickland's innocent biography that it is difficult to avoid feeling a certain sympathy for the unlucky parson. His decent

* This was described in Christie's catalogue as follows: "A nude woman, a native of the Society Islands, is lying on the ground beside a brook. Behind is a tropical landscape with palm-trees, bananas, etc. 60 in. x 48 in."

reticence is branded as hypocrisy, his circumlocutions are roundly called lies, and his silence is vilified as treachery. And on the strength of peccadillos, reprehensible in an author but excusable in a son, the Anglo-Saxon race is accused of prudishness, humbug, pretentiousness, deceit, cunning, and bad cooking. Personally I think it was rash of Mr. Strickland, in refuting the account which had gained belief of a certain "unpleasantness" between his father and mother, to state that Charles Strickland in a letter written from Paris had described her as "an excellent woman", since Dr. Weitbrecht-Rotholz was able to print the letter in facsimile, and it appears that the passage referred to ran in fact as follows: *God damn my wife. She is an excellent woman. I wish she was in hell.* It is not thus that the Church in its great days dealt with evidence that was unwelcome.

Dr. Weitbrecht-Rotholz was an enthusiastic admirer of Charles Strickland, and there was no danger that he would whitewash him. He had an unerring eye for the despicable motive in actions that had all the appearance of innocence. He was a psychopathologist as well as a student of art, and the subconscious had few secrets from him. No mystic ever saw deeper meaning in common things. The mystic sees the ineffable and the psychopathologist the unspeakable. There is a singular fascination in watching the eagerness with which the learned author ferrets out every circumstance which may throw discredit on his hero. His heart warms to him when he can bring forward some example of cruelty or meanness, and he exults like an inquisitor at the *auto-da-fé* of an heretic when with some forgotten story he can confound the filial piety of the Rev. Robert Strickland. His industry has been amazing. Nothing has been too small to escape him, and you may be sure that if Charles Strickland left a laundry bill unpaid it will be given you *in extenso*, and if he forbore to return a borrowed half-crown no detail of the transaction will be omitted.

CHAPTER II

WHEN so much has been written about Charles Strickland, it may seem unnecessary that I should write more. A painter's monument is his work. It is true I knew him more intimately than most: I met him first before ever he became a painter, and I saw him not

infrequently during the difficult years he spent in Paris; but I do not suppose I should ever have set down my recollections if the hazards of the war had not taken me to Tahiti. There, as is notorious, he spent the last years of his life; and there I came across persons who were familiar with him. I find myself in a position to throw light on just that part of his tragic career which has remained most obscure. If they who believe in Strickland's greatness are right, the personal narratives of such as knew him in the flesh can hardly be superfluous. What would we not give for the reminiscences of someone who had been as intimately acquainted with El Greco as I was with Strickland?

But I seek refuge in no such excuses. I forget who it was that recommended men for their souls' good to do each day two things they disliked: it was a wise man, and it is a precept that I have followed scrupulously; for every day I have got up and I have gone to bed. But there is in my nature a strain of asceticism, and I have subjected my flesh each week to a more severe mortification. I have never failed to read the Literary Supplement of *The Times*. It is a salutary discipline to consider the vast number of books that are written, the fair hopes with which their authors see them published, and the fate which awaits them. What chance is there that any book will make its way among that multitude? And the successful books are but the successes of a season. Heaven knows what pains the author has been at, what bitter experiences he has endured and what heartache suffered, to give some chance reader a few hours' relaxation or to while away the tedium of a journey. And if I may judge from the reviews, many of these books are well and carefully written; much thought has gone to their composition; to some even has been given the anxious labour of a lifetime. The moral I draw is that the writer should seek his reward in the pleasure of his work and in release from the burden of his thought; and, indifferent to aught else, care nothing for praise or censure, failure or success.

Now the war has come, bringing with it a new attitude. Youth has turned to gods we of an earlier day knew not, and it is possible to see already the direction in which those who come after us will move. The younger generation, conscious of strength and tumultuous, have done with knocking at the door; they have burst in and seated themselves in our seats. The air is noisy with their shouts. Of their elders some, by imitating the antics of youth, strive to persuade themselves that their day is not yet over; they

shout with the lustiest, but the war-cry sounds hollow in their mouth; they are like poor wantons attempting with pencil, paint and powder, with shrill gaiety, to recover the illusion of their spring. The wiser go their way with a decent grace. In their chastened smile is an indulgent mockery. They remember that they too trod down a sated generation, with just such clamour and with just such scorn, and they foresee that these brave torch-bearers will presently yield their place also. There is no last word. The new evangel was old when Nineveh reared her greatness to the sky. These gallant words which seemed so novel to those that speak them were said in accents scarcely changed a hundred times before. The pendulum swings backwards and forwards. The circle is ever travelled anew.

Sometimes a man survives a considerable time from an era in which he had his place into one which is strange to him, and then the curious are offered one of the most singular spectacles in the human comedy. Who now, for example, thinks of George Crabbe? He was a famous poet in his day, and the world recognised his genius with a unanimity which the greater complexity of modern life has rendered infrequent. He had learnt his craft at the school of Alexander Pope, and he wrote moral stories in rhymed couplets. Then came the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, and the poets sang new songs. Mr. Crabbe continued to write moral stories in rhymed couplets. I think he must have read the verse of these young men who were making so great a stir in the world, and I fancy he found it poor stuff. Of course, much of it was. But the odes of Keats and of Wordsworth, a poem or two by Coleridge, a few more by Shelley, discovered vast realms of the spirit that none had explored before. Mr. Crabbe was as dead as mutton, but Mr. Crabbe continued to write moral stories in rhymed couplets. I have read desultorily the writings of the younger generation. It may be that among them a more fervid Keats, a more ethereal Shelley, has already published numbers the world will willingly remember. I cannot tell. I admire their polish—their youth is already so accomplished that it seems absurd to speak of promise—I marvel at the felicity of their style; but with all their copiousness (their vocabulary suggests that they fingered Roget's *Thesaurus* in their cradles) they say nothing to me; to my mind they know too much and feel too obviously; I cannot stomach the heartiness with which they slap me on the back or the emotion with which they hurl themselves on

my bosom; their passion seems to me a little anæmic and their dreams a trifle dull. I do not like them. I am on the shelf. I will continue to write moral stories in rhymed couplets. But I should be thrice a fool if I did it for aught but my own entertainment.

CHAPTER, III

BUT all this is by the way.

I was very young when I wrote my first book. By a lucky chance it excited attention, and various persons sought my acquaintance.

It is not without melancholy that I wander among my recollections of the world of letters in London when first, bashful but eager, I was introduced to it. It is long since I frequented it, and if the novels that describe its present singularities are accurate, much in it is now changed. The venue is different. Chelsea and Bloomsbury have taken the place of Hampstead, Notting Hill Gate, and High Street, Kensington. Then it was a distinction to be under forty, but now to be more than twenty-five is absurd. I think in those days we were a little shy of our emotions, and the fear of ridicule tempered the more obvious forms of pretentiousness. I do not believe that there was in that genteel Bohemia an intensive culture of chastity, but I do not remember so crude a promiscuity as seems to be practised in the present day. We did not think it hypocritical to draw over our vagaries the curtain of a decent silence. The spade was not invariably called a bloody shovel. Woman had not yet altogether come into her own.

I lived near Victoria Station, and I recall long excursions by bus to the hospitable houses of the literary. In my timidity I wandered up and down the street while I screwed up my courage to ring the bell; and then, sick with apprehension, was ushered into an airless room full of people. I was introduced to this celebrated person after that one, and the kind words they said about my book made me excessively uncomfortable. I felt they expected me to say clever things, and I never could think of any till after the party was over. I tried to conceal my embarrassment by handing round cups of tea and rather ill-cut bread-and-butter. I wanted no one to take notice of me, so that I could observe these famous creatures at my ease and listen to the clever things they said.

I have a recollection of large, unbending women with great noses

and rapacious eyes, who wore their clothes as though they were armour; and of little, mouse-like spinsters, with soft voices and a shrewd glance. I never ceased to be fascinated by their persistence in eating buttered toast with their gloves on, and I observed with admiration the unconcern with which they wiped their fingers on their chair when they thought no one was looking. It must have been bad for the furniture, but I suppose the hostess took her revenge on the furniture of her friends when, in turn, she visited them. Some of them were dressed fashionably, and they said they couldn't for the life of them see why you should be dowdy just because you had written a novel; if you had a neat figure you might as well make the most of it, and a smart shoe on a small foot had never prevented an editor from taking your "stuff". But others thought this frivolous, and they wore "art fabrics" and barbaric jewellery. The men were seldom eccentric in appearance. They tried to look as little like authors as possible. They wished to be taken for men of the world, and could have passed anywhere for the managing clerks of a City firm. They always seemed a little tired. I had never known writers before, and I found them very strange, but I do not think they ever seemed to me quite real.

I remember that I thought their conversation brilliant, and I used to listen with astonishment to the stinging humour with which they would tear a brother-author to pieces the moment that his back was turned. The artist has this advantage over the rest of the world, that his friends offer not only their appearance and their character to his satire, but also their work. I despaired of ever expressing myself with such aptness or with such fluency. In those days conversation was still cultivated as an art; a neat repartee was more highly valued than the crackling of thorns under a pot; and the epigram, not yet a mechanical appliance by which the dull may achieve a semblance of wit, gave sprightliness to the small talk of the urbane. It is sad that I can remember nothing of all this scintillation. But I think the conversation never settled down so comfortably as when it turned to the details of the trade which was the other side of the art we practised. When we had done discussing the merits of the latest book, it was natural to wonder how many copies had been sold, what advance the author had received, and how much he was likely to make out of it. Then we would speak of this publisher and of that, comparing the generosity of one with the meanness of another; we would argue whether it was better to go to one who gave handsome royalties or

to another who "pushed" a book for all it was worth. Some advertised badly and some well. Some were modern and some were old-fashioned. Then we would talk of agents and the offers they had obtained for us; of editors and the sort of contributions they welcomed, how much they paid a thousand, and whether they paid promptly or otherwise. To me it was all very romantic. It gave me an intimate sense of being a member of some mystic brotherhood.

CHAPTER IV

No one was kinder to me at that time than Rose Waterford. She combined a masculine intelligence with a feminine perversity, and the novels she wrote were original and disconcerting. It was at her house one day that I met Charles Strickland's wife. Miss Waterford was giving a tea-party, and her small room was more than usually full. Everyone seemed to be talking, and I, sitting in silence, felt awkward; but I was too shy to break into any of the groups that seemed absorbed in their own affairs. Miss Waterford was a good hostess, and seeing my embarrassment came up to me.

"I want you to talk to Mrs. Strickland," she said. "She's raving about your book."

"What does she do?" I asked.

I was conscious of my ignorance, and if Mrs. Strickland was a well-known writer I thought it as well to ascertain the fact before I spoke to her.

Rose Waterford cast down her eyes demurely to give greater effect to her reply.

"She gives luncheon-parties. You've only got to roar a little, and she'll ask you."

Rose Waterford was a cynic. She looked upon life as an opportunity for writing novels and the public as her raw material. Now and then she invited members of it to her house if they showed an appreciation of her talent and entertained with proper lavishness. She held their weakness for lions in good-humoured contempt, but played to them her part of the distinguished woman of letters with decorum.

I was led up to Mrs. Strickland, and for ten minutes we talked together. I noticed nothing about her except that she had a pleasant voice. She had a flat in Westminster, overlooking the

unfinished cathedral, and because we lived in the same neighbourhood we felt friendly disposed to one another. The Army and Navy Stores are a bond of union between all who dwell between the river and St. James's Park. Mrs. Strickland asked me for my address, and a few days later I received an invitation to luncheon.

My engagements were few, and I was glad to accept. When I arrived, a little late, because in my fear of being too early I had walked three times round the cathedral, I found the party already complete. Miss Waterford was there and Mrs. Jay, Richard Twining and George Road. We were all writers. It was a fine day, early in spring, and we were in a good humour. We talked about a hundred things. Miss Waterford, torn between the æstheticism of her early youth, when she used to go to parties in sage green, holding a daffodil, and the flippancy of her maturer years, which tended to high heels and Paris frocks, wore a new hat. It put her in high spirits. I had never heard her more malicious about our common friends. Mrs. Jay, aware that impropriety is the soul of wit, made observations in tones hardly above a whisper that might well have tinged the snowy table-cloth with a rosy hue. Richard Twining bubbled over with quaint absurdities, and George Road, conscious that he need not exhibit a brilliancy which was almost a byword, opened his mouth only to put food into it. Mrs. Strickland did not talk much, but she had a pleasant gift for keeping the conversation general; and when there was a pause she threw in just the right remark to set it going once more. She was a woman of thirty-seven, rather tall, and plump, without being fat; she was not pretty, but her face was pleasing, chiefly, perhaps, on account of her kind brown eyes. Her skin was rather sallow. Her dark hair was elaborately dressed. She was the only woman of the three whose face was free of make-up, and by contrast with the others she seemed simple and unaffected.

The dining-room was in the good taste of the period. It was very severe. There was a high dado of white wood and a green paper on which were etchings of Whistler in neat black frames. The green curtains, with their peacock design, hung in straight lines, and the green carpet, in the pattern of which pale rabbits frolicked among leafy trees, suggested the influence of William Morris. There was blue delf on the chimney-piece. At that time, there must have been five hundred dining-rooms in London decorated in exactly the same manner. It was chaste, artistic, and dull.

When we left I walked away with Miss Waterford, and the fine day and her new hat persuaded us to saunter through the Park.

"That was a very nice party," I said.

"Did you think the food was good? I told her that if she wanted writers she must feed them well."

"Admirable advice," I answered. "But why does she want them?"

Miss Waterford shrugged her shoulders.

"She finds them amusing. She wants to be in the movement. I fancy she's rather simple, poor dear, and she thinks we're all wonderful. After all, it pleases her to ask us to luncheon, and it doesn't hurt us. I like her for it."

Looking back, I think that Mrs. Strickland was the most harmless of all the lion-hunters that pursue their quarry from the rarefied heights of Hampstead to the nethermost studios of Cheyne Walk. She had led a very quiet youth in the country, and the books that came down from Mudie's Library brought with them not only their own romance, but the romance of London. She had a real passion for reading (rare in her kind, who for the most part are more interested in the author than in his book, in the painter than in his pictures), and she invented a world of the imagination in which she lived with a freedom she never acquired in the world of every day. When she came to know writers it was like adventuring upon a stage which till then she had only known from the other side of the footlights. She saw them dramatically, and really seemed herself to live a larger life because she entertained them and visited them in their fastnesses. She accepted the rules with which they played the game of life as valid for them, but never for a moment thought of regulating her own conduct in accordance with them. Their moral eccentricities, like their oddities of dress, their wild theories and paradoxes, were an entertainment which amused her, but had not the slightest influence on her convictions.

"Is there a Mr. Strickland?" I asked.

"Oh yes; he's something in the city. I believe he's a stock-broker. He's very dull."

"Are they good friends?"

"They adore one another. You'll meet him if you dine there. But she doesn't often have people to dinner. He's very quiet. He's not in the least interested in literature or the arts."

"Why do nice women marry dull men?"

"Because intelligent men won't marry nice women."

I could not think of any retort to this, so I asked if Mrs. Strickland had children.

"Yes; she has a boy and a girl. They're both at school."

The subject was exhausted, and we began to talk of other things.

CHAPTER V

DURING the summer I met Mrs. Strickland not infrequently. I went now and then to pleasant little luncheons at her flat, and to rather more formidable tea-parties. We took a fancy to one another. I was very young, and perhaps she liked the idea of guiding my virgin steps on the hard road of letters; while for me it was pleasant to have someone I could go to with my small troubles, certain of an attentive ear and reasonable counsel. Mrs. Strickland had the gift of sympathy. It is a charming faculty, but one often abused by those who are conscious of its possession: for there is something ghoulish in the avidity with which they will pounce upon the misfortune of their friends so that they may exercise their dexterity. It gushes forth like an oil-well, and the sympathetic pour out their sympathy with an abandon that is sometimes embarrassing to their victims. There are bosoms on which so many tears have been shed that I cannot bedew them with mine. Mrs. Strickland used her advantage with tact. You felt that you obliged her by accepting her sympathy. When, in the enthusiasm of my youth, I remarked on this to Rose Waterford, she said:

"Milk is very nice, especially with a drop of brandy in it, but the domestic cow is only too glad to be rid of it. A swollen udder is very uncomfortable."

Rose Waterford had a blistering tongue. No one could say such bitter things; on the other hand, no one could do more charming ones.

There was another thing I liked in Mrs. Strickland. She managed her surroundings with elegance. Her flat was always neat and cheerful, gay with flowers, and the chintzes in the drawing-room, notwithstanding their severe design, were bright and pretty. The meals in the artistic little dining-room were pleasant; the table

looked nice, the two maids were trim and comely, the food was well cooked. It was impossible not to see that Mrs. Strickland was an excellent housekeeper. And you felt sure that she was an admirable mother. There were photographs in the drawing-room of her son and daughter. The son—his name was Robert—was a boy of sixteen at Rugby; and you saw him in flannels and a cricket cap, and again in a tail-coat and a stand-up collar. He had his mother's candid brow and fine, reflective eyes. He looked clean, healthy, and normal.

"I don't know that he's very clever," she said one day, when I was looking at the photograph, "but I know he's good. He has a charming character."

The daughter was fourteen. Her hair, thick and dark like her mother's, fell over her shoulders in fine profusion, and she had the same kindly expression and sedate, untroubled eyes.

"They're both of them the image of you," I said.

"Yes; I think they are more like me than their father."

"Why have you never let me meet him?" I asked.

"Would you like to?"

She smiled, her smile was really very sweet, and she blushed a little; it was singular that a woman of that age should flush so readily. Perhaps her naïveté was her greatest charm.

"You know, he's not at all literary," she said. "He's a perfect philistine."

She said this not disparagingly, but affectionately rather, as though, by acknowledging the worst about him, she wished to protect him from the aspersions of her friends.

"He's on the Stock Exchange, and he's a typical broker. I think he'd bore you to death."

"Does he bore you?" I asked.

"You see, I happen to be his wife. I'm very fond of him."

She smiled to cover her shyness, and I fancied she had a fear that I would make the sort of gibe that such a confession could hardly have failed to elicit from Rose Waterford. She hesitated a little. Her eyes grew tender.

"He doesn't pretend to be a genius. He doesn't even make much money on the Stock Exchange. But he's awfully good and kind."

"I think I should like him very much."

"I'll ask you to dine with us quietly some time, but mind, you come at your own risk; don't blame me if you have a very dull evening."

CHAPTER VI

BUT when at last I met Charles Strickland, it was under circumstances which allowed me to do no more than just make his acquaintance. One morning Mrs. Strickland sent me round a note to say that she was giving a dinner-party that evening, and one of her guests had failed her. She asked me to stop the gap. She wrote:

It's only decent to warn you that you will be bored to extinction. It was a thoroughly dull party from the beginning, but if you will come I shall be uncommonly grateful. And you and I can have a little chat by ourselves.

It was only neighbourly to accept.

When Mrs. Strickland introduced me to her husband, he gave me a rather indifferent hand to shake. Turning to him gaily, she attempted a small jest.

"I asked him to show him that I really had a husband. I think he was beginning to doubt it."

Strickland gave the polite little laugh with which people acknowledge a facetiousness in which they see nothing funny, but did not speak. New arrivals claimed my host's attention, and I was left to myself. When at last we were all assembled, waiting for dinner to be announced, I reflected, while I chatted with the woman I had been asked to "take in", that civilised man practises a strange ingenuity in wasting on tedious exercises the brief span of his life. It was the kind of party which makes you wonder why the hostess has troubled to bid her guests, and why the guests have troubled to come. There were ten people. They met with indifference, and would part with relief. It was, of course, a purely social function. The Stricklands "owed" dinners to a number of persons, whom they took no interest in, and so had asked them; these persons had accepted. Why? To avoid the tedium of dining *tête-à-tête*, to give their servants a rest, because there was no reason to refuse, because they were "owed" a dinner.

The dining-room was inconveniently crowded. There was a K.C. and his wife, a Government official and his wife, Mrs. Strickland's sister and her husband, Colonel MacAndrew, and the wife of a Member of Parliament. It was because the Member of

Parliament found that he could not leave the House that I had been invited. The respectability of the party was portentous. The women were too nice to be well dressed, and too sure of their position to be amusing. The men were solid. There was about all of them an air of well-satisfied prosperity.

Everyone talked a little louder than natural in an instinctive desire to make the party go, and there was a great deal of noise in the room. But there was no general conversation. Each one talked to his neighbour; to his neighbour on the right during the soup, fish and entrée; to his neighbour on the left during the roast, sweet, and savoury. They talked of the political situation and of golf, of their children and the latest play, of the pictures at the Royal Academy, of the weather and their plans for the holidays. There was never a pause, and the noise grew louder. Mrs. Strickland might congratulate herself that her party was a success. Her husband played his part with decorum. Perhaps he did not talk very much, and I fancied there was toward the end a look of fatigue in the faces of the women on either side of him. They were finding him too heavy. Once or twice Mrs. Strickland's eyes rested on him somewhat anxiously.

At last she rose and shepherded the ladies out of the room. Strickland shut the door behind her, and, moving to the other end of the table, took his place between the K.C. and the Government official. He passed round the port again and handed us cigars. The K.C. remarked on the excellence of the wine, and Strickland told us where he got it. We began to chat about vintages and tobacco. The K.C. told us of a case he was engaged in, and the colonel talked about polo. I had nothing to say and so sat silent, trying politely to show interest in the conversation; and because I thought no one was in the least concerned with me, examined Strickland at my ease. He was bigger than I expected; I do not know why I had imagined him slender and of insignificant appearance; in point of fact, he was broad and heavy, with large hands and feet, and he wore his evening clothes clumsily. He gave you somewhat the idea of a coachman dressed up for the occasion. He was a man of forty, not good-looking, and yet not ugly, for his features were rather good; but they were all a little larger than life-size, and the effect was ungainly. He was clean-shaven, and his large face looked uncomfortably naked. His hair was reddish, cut very short, and his eyes were small, blue or grey. He looked commonplace. I no longer wondered that Mrs. Strickland felt a

certain embarrassment about him; he was scarcely a credit to a woman who wanted to make herself a position in the world of art and letters. It was obvious that he had no social gifts, but these a man can do without; he had no eccentricity even, to take him out of the common run; he was just a good, dull, honest, plain man. One would admire his excellent qualities but avoid his company. He was null. He was probably a worthy member of society, a good husband and father, an honest broker, but there was no reason to waste one's time over him.

CHAPTER VII

THE season was drawing to its dusty end, and everyone I knew was arranging to go away. Mrs. Strickland was taking her family to the coast of Norfolk, so that the children might have the sea and her husband golf. We said good-bye to one another, and arranged to meet in the autumn. But on my last day in town, coming out of the Stores, I met her with her son and daughter; like myself, she had been making her final purchases before leaving London, and we were both hot and tired. I proposed that we should all go and eat ices in the Park.

I think Mrs. Strickland was glad to show me her children, and she accepted my invitation with alacrity. They were even more attractive than their photographs had suggested, and she was right to be proud of them. I was young enough for them not to feel shy, and they chattered merrily about one thing and another. They were extraordinarily nice, healthy young children. It was very agreeable under the trees.

When in an hour they crowded into a cab to go home, I strolled idly to my club. I was perhaps a little lonely, and it was with a touch of envy that I thought of the pleasant family life of which I had had a glimpse. They seemed devoted to one another. They had little private jokes of their own which, unintelligible to the outsider, amused them enormously. Perhaps Charles Strickland was dull, judged by a standard that demanded above all things verbal scintillation; but his intelligence was adequate to his surroundings, and that is a passport, not only to reasonable success, but still more to happiness. Mrs. Strickland was a charming woman, and she loved him. I pictured their lives,

troubled by no untoward adventure, honest, decent, and, by reason of those two upstanding, pleasant children, so obviously destined to carry on the normal traditions of their race and station, not without significance. They would grow old insensibly; they would see their son and daughter come to years of reason, marry in due course—the one a pretty girl, future mother of healthy children; the other a handsome, manly fellow, obviously a soldier; and at last, prosperous in their dignified retirement, beloved by their descendants, after a happy, not unuseful life, in the fullness of their age they would sink into the grave.

That must be the story of innumerable couples, and the pattern of life it offers has a homely grace. It reminds you of a placid rivulet, meandering smoothly through green pastures and shaded by pleasant trees, till at last it falls into the vasty sea; but the sea is so calm, so silent, so indifferent, that you are troubled suddenly by a vague uneasiness. Perhaps it is only a kink in my nature, strong in me even in those days, that I felt in such an existence, the share of the great majority, something amiss. I recognised its social value, I saw its ordered happiness, but a fever in my blood asked for a wilder course. There seemed to me something alarming in such easy delights. In my heart was a desire to live more dangerously. I was not unprepared for jagged rocks and treacherous shoals if I could only have change—change and the excitement of the unforeseen.

CHAPTER VIII

ON reading over what I have written of the Stricklands, I am conscious that they must seem shadowy. I have been able to invest them with none of those characteristics which make the persons of a book exist with a real life of their own; and, wondering if the fault is mine, I rack my brains to remember idiosyncrasies which might lend them vividness. I feel that by dwelling on some trick of speech or some queer habit I should be able to give them a significance peculiar to themselves. As they stand they are like the figures in an old tapestry; they do not separate themselves from the background, and at a distance seem to lose their pattern, so that you have little but a pleasing piece of colour. My only excuse is that the impression they made on me was no other.

There was just that shadowiness about them which you find in people whose lives are part of the social organism, so that they exist in it and by it only. They are like cells in the body, essential, but, so long as they remain healthy, engulfed in the momentous whole. The Stricklands were an average family in the middle class. A pleasant, hospitable woman, with a harmless craze for the small lions of literary society; a rather dull man, doing his duty in that state of life in which a merciful Providence had placed him; two nice-looking, healthy children. Nothing could be more ordinary. I do not know that there was anything about them to excite the attention of the curious.

When I reflect on all that happened later, I ask myself if I was thick-witted not to see that there was in Charles Strickland at least something out of the common. Perhaps. I think that I have gathered in the years that intervene between then and now a fair knowledge of mankind, but even if when I first met the Stricklands I had the experience which I have now, I do not believe that I should have judged them differently. But because I have learnt that man is incalculable, I should not at this time of day be so surprised by the news that reached me when in the early autumn I returned to London.

I had not been back twenty-four hours before I ran across Rose Waterford in Jermyn Street.

"You look very gay and sprightly," I said. "What's the matter with you?"

She smiled, and her eyes shone with a malice I knew already. It meant that she had heard some scandal about one of her friends, and the instinct of the literary woman was all alert.

"You did meet Charles Strickland, didn't you?"

Not only her face, but her whole body, gave a sense of alacrity. I nodded. I wondered if the poor devil had been hammered on the Stock Exchange or run over by an omnibus.

"Isn't it dreadful? He's run away from his wife."

Miss Waterford certainly felt that she could not do her subject justice on the kerb of Jermyn Street, and so, like an artist, flung the bare fact at me and declared that she knew no details. I could not do her the injustice of supposing that so trifling a circumstance would have prevented her from giving them, but she was obstinate.

"I tell you I know nothing," she said, in reply to my agitated questions, and then, with an airy shrug of the shoulders: "I believe that a young person in a City tea-shop has left her situation."

She flashed a smile at me, and, protesting an engagement with her dentist, jauntily walked on. I was more interested than distressed. In those days my experience of life at first hand was small, and it excited me to come upon an incident among people I knew of the same sort as I had read in books. I confess that time has now accustomed me to incidents of their character among my acquaintance. But I was also a little shocked. Strickland was certainly forty, and I thought it disgusting that a man of his age should concern himself with affairs of the heart. With the superciliousness of extreme youth, I put thirty-five as the utmost limit at which a man might fall in love without making a fool of himself. And this news was slightly disconcerting to me personally, because I had written from the country to Mrs. Strickland, announcing my return, and had added that unless I heard from her to the contrary, I would come on a certain day to drink a dish of tea with her. This was the very day, and I had received no word from Mrs. Strickland. Did she want to see me or did she not? It was likely enough that in the agitation of the moment my note has escaped her memory. Perhaps I should be wiser not to go. On the other hand, she might wish to keep the affair quiet, and it might be highly indiscreet on my part to give any sign that this strange news had reached me. I was torn between the fear of hurting a nice woman's feelings and the fear of being in the way. I felt she must be suffering, and I did not want to see a pain which I could not help; but in my heart was a desire, that I felt a little ashamed of, to see how she was taking it. I did not know what to do.

Finally it occurred to me that I would call as though nothing had happened, and send a message in by the maid asking Mrs. Strickland if it was convenient for her to see me. This would give her the opportunity to send me away. But I was overwhelmed with embarrassment when I said to the maid the phrase I had prepared, and while I waited for the answer in a dark passage I had to call up all my strength of mind not to bolt. The maid came back. Her manner suggested to my excited fancy a complete knowledge of the domestic calamity.

"Will you come this way, sir?" she said.

I followed her into the drawing-room. The blinds were partly drawn to darken the room, and Mrs. Strickland was sitting with her back to the light. Her brother-in-law, Colonel MacAndrew, stood in front of the fireplace, warming his back at an unlit fire. To myself my entrance seemed excessively awkward. I imagined

that my arrival had taken them by surprise, and Mrs. Strickland had let me come in only because she had forgotten to put me off. I fancied that the colonel resented the interruption.

"I wasn't quite sure if you expected me," I said, trying to seem unconcerned.

"Of course I did. Anne will bring the tea in a minute."

Even in the darkened room, I could not help seeing that Mrs. Strickland's face was all swollen with tears. Her skin, never very good, was earthy.

"You remember my brother-in-law, don't you? You met at dinner here, just before the holidays."

We shook hands. I felt so shy that I could think of nothing to say, but Mrs. Strickland came to my rescue. She asked me what I had been doing with myself during the summer, and with this help I managed to make some conversation till tea was brought in. The colonel asked for a whisky-and-soda.

"You'd better have one too, Amy," he said.

"No; I prefer tea."

This was the first suggestion that anything untoward had happened. I took no notice, and did my best to engage Mrs. Strickland in talk. The colonel, still standing in front of the fireplace, uttered no word. I wondered how soon I could decently take my leave, and I asked myself why on earth Mrs. Strickland had allowed me to come. There were no flowers, and various knick-knacks, put away during the summer, had not been replaced; there was something cheerless and stiff about the room which had always seemed so friendly; it gave you an odd feeling, as though someone were lying dead on the other side of the wall. I finished tea.

"Will you have a cigarette?" asked Mrs. Strickland.

She looked about for the box, but it was not to be seen.

"I'm afraid there are none."

Suddenly she burst into tears, and hurried from the room.

I was startled. I suppose now that the lack of cigarettes, brought as a rule by her husband, forced him back upon her recollection, and the new feeling that the small comforts she was used to were missing gave her a sudden pang. She realised that the old life was gone and done with. It was impossible to keep up our social pretences any longer.

"I dare say you'd like me to go," I said to the colonel, getting up.

"I suppose you've heard that blackguard has deserted her," he cried explosively.

I hesitated.

"You know how people gossip," I answered. "I was vaguely told that something was wrong."

"He's bolted. He's gone off to Paris with a woman. He's left Amy without a penny."

"I'm awfully sorry," I said, not knowing what else to say.

The colonel gulped down his whisky. He was a tall, lean man of fifty, with a drooping moustache and grey hair. He had pale blue eyes and a weak mouth. I remembered from my previous meeting with him that he had a foolish face, and was proud of the fact that for ten years before he left the army he had played polo three days a week.

"I don't suppose Mrs. Strickland wants to be bothered with me just now," I said. "Will you tell her how sorry I am? If there's anything I can do, I shall be delighted to do it."

He took no notice of me.

"I don't know what's to become of her. And then there are the children. Are they going to live on air? Seventeen years."

"What about seventeen years?"

"They've been married," he snapped. "I never liked him. Of course he was my brother-in-law, and I made the best of it. Did you think him a gentleman? She ought never to have married him."

"Is it absolutely final?"

"There's only one thing for her to do, and that's to divorce him. That's what I was telling her when you came in. 'Fire in with your petition, my dear Amy,' I said. 'You owe it to yourself and you owe it to the children.' He'd better not let me catch sight of him. I'd thrash him within an inch of his life."

I could not help thinking that Colonel MacAndrew might have some difficulty in doing this, since Strickland had struck me as a hefty fellow, but I did not say anything. It is always distressing when outraged morality does not possess the strength of arm to administer direct chastisement on the sinner. I was making up my mind to another attempt at going when Mrs. Strickland came back. She had dried her eyes and powdered her nose.

"I'm sorry I broke down," she said. "I'm glad you didn't go away."

She sat down. I did not at all know what to say. I felt a certain

shyness at referring to matters which were no concern of mine. I did not then know the besetting sin of woman, the passion to discuss her private affairs with anyone who is willing to listen. Mrs. Strickland seemed to make an effort over herself.

"Are people talking about it?" she asked.

I was taken aback by her assumption that I knew all about her domestic misfortune.

"I've only just come back. The only person I've seen is Rose Waterford."

Mrs. Strickland clasped her hands.

"Tell me exactly what she said." And when I hesitated, she insisted. "I particularly want to know."

"You know the way people talk. She's not very reliable, is she? She said your husband had left you."

"Is that all?"

I did not choose to repeat Rose Waterford's parting reference to a girl from a tea-shop. I lied.

"She didn't say anything about his going with anyone?"

"No."

"That's all I wanted to know."

I was a little puzzled, but at all events I understood that I might now take my leave. When I shook hands with Mrs. Strickland I told her that if I could be of any use to her I should be very glad. She smiled wanly.

"Thank you so much. I don't know that anybody can do anything for me."

Too shy to express my sympathy, I turned to say good-bye to the colonel. He did not take my hand.

"I'm just coming. If you're walking up Victoria Street, I'll come along with you."

"All right," I said. "Come on."

CHAPTER IX

"THIS is a terrible thing," he said, the moment we got out into the street.

I realised that he had come away with me in order to discuss once more what he had been already discussing for hours with his sister-in-law.

"We don't know who the woman is, you know," he said. "All we know is that the blackguard's gone to Paris."

"I thought they got on so well."

"So they did.* Why, just before you came in Amy said they'd never had a quarrel in the whole of their married life. You know Amy. There never was a better woman in the world."

Since these confidences were thrust on me, I saw no harm in asking a few questions.

"But do you mean to say she suspected nothing?"

"Nothing. He spent August with her and the children in Norfolk. He was just the same as he'd always been. We went down for two or three days, my wife and I, and I played golf with them. He came back to town in September to let his partner go away, and Amy stayed on in the country. They'd taken a house for six weeks, and at the end of her tenancy she wrote to tell him on which day she was arriving in London. He answered from Paris. He said he'd made up his mind not to live with her any more."

"What explanation did he give?"

"My dear fellow, he gave no explanation. I've seen the letter. It wasn't more than ten lines."

"But that's extraordinary."

We happened then to cross the street, and the traffic prevented us from speaking. What Colonel MacAndrew had told me seemed very improbable, and I suspected that Mrs. Strickland, for reasons of her own, had concealed from him some part of the facts. It was clear that a man after seventeen years of wedlock did not leave his wife without certain occurrences which must have led her to suspect that all was not well with their married life. The colonel caught me up.

"Of course, there was no explanation he could give except that he'd gone off with a woman. I suppose he thought she could find that out for herself. That's the sort of chap he was."

"What is Mrs. Strickland going to do?"

"Well, the first thing is to get our proofs. I'm going over to Paris myself."

"And what about his business?"

"That's where he's been so artful. He's been drawing in his horns for the last year."

"Did he tell his partner he was leaving?"

"Not a word."

Colonel MacAndrew had a very sketchy knowledge of business matters, and I had none at all, so I did not quite understand under what conditions Strickland had left his affairs. I gathered that the deserted partner was very angry and threatened proceedings. It appeared that when everything was settled he would be four or five hundred pounds out of pocket.

"It's lucky the furniture in the flat is in Amy's name. She'll have that at all events."

"Did you mean it when you said she wouldn't have a bob?"

"Of course I did. She's got two or three hundred pounds and the furniture."

"But how is she going to live?"

"God knows."

The affair seemed to grow more complicated, and the colonel, with his expletives and his indignation, confused rather than informed me. I was glad that, catching sight of the clock at the Army and Navy Stores, he remembered an engagement to play cards at his club, and so left me to cut across St. James's Park.

CHAPTER X

A DAY or two later Mrs. Strickland sent me round a note asking if I could go and see her that evening after dinner. I found her alone. Her black dress, simple to austerity, suggested her bereaved condition, and I was innocently astonished that notwithstanding a real emotion she was able to dress the part she had to play according to her notions of seemliness.

"You said that if I wanted you to do anything you wouldn't mind doing it," she remarked.

"It was quite true."

"Will you go over to Paris and see Charlie?"

"I?"

I was taken aback. I reflected that I had only seen him once. I did not know what she wanted me to do.

"Fred is set on going." Fred was Colonel MacAndrew. "But I'm sure he's not the man to go. He'll only make things worse. I don't know who else to ask."

Her voice trembled a little, and I felt a brute even to hesitate.

"But I've not spoken ten words to your husband. He doesn't know me. He'll probably just tell me to go to the devil."

"That wouldn't hurt you," said Mrs. Strickland, smiling.

"What is it exactly you want me to do?"

She did not answer directly.

"I think it's rather an advantage that he doesn't know you. You see, he never really liked Fred; he thought him a fool; he didn't understand soldiers. Fred would fly into a passion, and there'd be a quarrel, and things would be worse instead of better. If you said you came on my behalf, he couldn't refuse to listen to you."

"I haven't known you very long," I answered. "I don't see how anyone can be expected to tackle a case like this unless he knows all the details. I don't want to pry into what doesn't concern me. Why don't you go and see him yourself?"

"You forget he isn't alone."

I held my tongue. I saw myself calling on Charles Strickland and sending in my card; I saw him come into the room, holding it between finger and thumb:

"To what do I owe this honour?"

"I've come to see you about your wife."

"Really. When you are a little older you will doubtless learn the advantage of minding your own business. If you will be so good as to turn your head slightly to the left, you will see the door. I wish you good-afternoon."

I foresaw that it would be difficult to make my exit with dignity and I wished to goodness that I had not returned to London till Mrs. Strickland had composed her difficulties. I stole a glance at her. She was immersed in thought. Presently she looked up at me, sighed deeply, and smiled.

"It was all so unexpected," she said. "We'd been married seventeen years. I never dreamed that Charlie was the sort of man to get infatuated with anyone. We always got on well together. Of course, I had a great many interests that he didn't share."

"Have you found out who"—I did not quite know how to express myself—"who the person, who it is he's gone away with?"

"No. No one seems to have an idea. It's so strange. Generally when a man falls in love with someone people see them about together, lunching or something, and her friends always come and tell the wife. I had no warning—nothing. His letter came like a thunderbolt. I thought he was perfectly happy."

She began to cry, poor thing, and I felt very sorry for her. But in a little while she grew calmer.

"It's no good making a fool of myself," she said, drying her eyes. "The only thing is to decide what is the best thing to do."

She went on, talking somewhat at random, now of the recent past, then of their first meeting and their marriage; but presently I began to form a fairly coherent picture of their lives; and it seemed to me that my surmises had not been incorrect. Mrs. Strickland was the daughter of an Indian Civilian, who on his retirement had settled in the depths of the country, but it was his habit every August to take his family to Eastbourne for change of air; and it was here, when she was twenty, that she met Charles Strickland. He was twenty-three. They played tennis together, walked on the front together, listened together to the nigger minstrels; and she had made up her mind to accept him a week before he proposed to her. They lived in London, first in Hampstead, and then, as he grew more prosperous, in town. Two children were born to them.

"He always seemed very fond of them. Even if he was tired of me, I wonder that he had the heart to leave them. It's all so incredible. Even now I can hardly believe it's true."

At last she showed me the letter he had written. I was curious to see it, but had not ventured to ask for it.

My dear Amy,

I think you will find everything all right in the flat. I have given Anne your instructions, and dinner will be ready for you and the children when you come. I shall not be there to meet you. I have made up my mind to live apart from you, and I am going to Paris in the morning. I shall post this letter on my arrival. I shall not come back. My decision is irrevocable.

*Yours always,
Charles Strickland.*

"Not a word of explanation or regret. Don't you think it's inhuman?"

"It's a very strange letter under the circumstances," I replied.

"There's only one explanation, and that is that he's not himself. I don't know who this woman is who's got hold of him, but she's made him into another man. It's evidently been going on a long time."

"What makes you think that?"

"Fred found that out. My husband said he went to the club three or four nights a week to play bridge. Fred knows one of the members, and said something about Charles being a great bridge player. The man was surprised. He said he'd never even seen Charles in the card-room. It's quite clear now that when I thought Charles was at his club he was with her."

I was silent for a moment. Then I thought of the children.

"It must have been very difficult to explain to Robert," I said.

"Oh, I never said a word to either of them. You see, we only came up to town the day before they had to go back to school. I had the presence of mind to say that their father had been called away on business."

It could not have been very easy to be bright and careless with that sudden secret in her heart, nor to give her attention to all the things that needed doing to get her children comfortably packed off. Mrs. Strickland's voice broke again.

"And what is to happen to them, poor darlings? How are we going to live?"

She struggled for self-control, and I saw her hands clench and unclench spasmodically. It was dreadfully painful.

"Of course I'll go over to Paris if you think I can do any good, but you must tell me exactly what you want me to do."

"I want him to come back."

"I understand from Colonel MacAndrew that you'd made up your mind to divorce him."

"I'll never divorce him," she answered with a sudden violence.

"Tell him that from me. He'll never be able to marry that woman. I'm as obstinate as he is, and I'll never divorce him. I have to think of my children."

I think she added this to explain her attitude to me, but I thought it was due to a very natural jealousy rather than to maternal solicitude.

"Are you in love with him still?"

"I don't know. I want him to come back. If he'll do that we'll let bygones be bygones. After all, we've been married for seventeen years. I'm a broad-minded woman. I wouldn't have minded what he did as long as I knew nothing about it. He must know that his infatuation won't last. If he'll come back now everything can be smoothed over, and no one will know anything about it."

It chilled me a little that Mrs. Strickland should be concerned

with gossip, for I did not know then how great a part is played in women's life by the opinion of others. It throws a shadow of insincerity over their most deeply felt emotions:

It was known where Strickland was staying. His partner in a violent letter, sent to his bank, had taunted him with hiding his whereabouts; and Strickland, in a cynical and humorous reply, had told his partner exactly where to find him. He was apparently living in an hotel.

"I've never heard of it," said Mrs. Strickland. "But Fred knows it well. He says it's very expensive."

She flushed darkly. I imagined that she saw her husband installed in a luxurious suite of rooms, dining at one smart restaurant after another, and she pictured his days spent at race meetings and his evenings at the play.

"It can't go on at his age," she said. "After all, he's forty. I could understand it in a young man, but I think it's horrible in a man of his years, with children who are nearly grown up. His health will never stand it."

Anger struggled in her breast with misery.

"Tell him our home cries out for him. Everything is just the same, and yet everything is different. I can't live without him. I'd sooner kill myself. Talk to him about the past, and all we've gone through together. What am I to say to the children when they ask for him? His room is exactly as it was when he left it. It's waiting for him. We're all waiting for him."

Now she told me exactly what I should say. She gave me elaborate answers to every possible observation of his.

"You will do everything you can for me?" she said pitifully. "Tell him what a state I'm in."

I saw that she wished me to appeal to his sympathies by every means in my power. She was weeping freely. I was extraordinarily touched. I felt indignant at Strickland's cold cruelty, and I promised to do all I could to bring him back. I agreed to go over on the next day but one, and to stay in Paris till I had achieved something. Then, as it was growing late and we were both exhausted by so much emotion, I left her.

CHAPTER XI

DURING the journey I thought over my errand with misgiving. Now that I was free from the spectacle of Mrs. Strickland's distress I could consider the matter more calmly. I was puzzled by the contradictions that I saw in her behaviour. She was very unhappy, but to excite my sympathy she was able to make a show of her unhappiness. It was evident that she had been prepared to weep, for she had provided herself with a sufficiency of handkerchiefs; I admired her forethought, but in retrospect it made her tears perhaps less moving. I could not decide whether she desired the return of her husband because she loved him, or because she dreaded the tongue of scandal; and I was perturbed by the suspicion that the anguish of love contemned was alloyed in her broken heart with the pangs, sordid to my young mind, of wounded vanity. I had not yet learnt how contradictory is human nature; I did not know how much pose there is in the sincere, how much baseness in the noble, nor how much goodness in the reprobate.

But there was something of an adventure in my trip, and my spirits rose as I approached Paris. I saw myself, too, from the dramatic standpoint, and I was pleased with the rôle of the trusted friend bringing back the errant husband to his forgiving wife. I made up my mind to see Strickland the following evening, for I felt instinctively that the hour must be chosen with delicacy. An appeal to the emotions is little likely to be effectual before luncheon. My own thoughts were then constantly occupied with love, but I never could imagine connubial bliss till after tea.

I enquired at my hotel for that in which Charles Strickland was living. It was called the Hôtel des Belges. But the concierge, somewhat to my surprise, had never heard of it. I had understood Mrs. Strickland that it was a large and sumptuous place at the back of the Rue de Rivoli. We looked it out in the directory. The only hotel of that name was in the Rue des Moines. The quarter was not fashionable; it was not even respectable. I shook my head.

"I'm sure that's not it," I said.

The concierge shrugged his shoulders. There was no other hotel of that name in Paris. It occurred to me that Strickland had concealed his address, after all. In giving his partner the one I knew he was perhaps playing a trick on him. I do not know why I

had an inkling that it would appeal to Strickland's sense of humour to bring a furious stockbroker over to Paris on a fool's errand to an ill-famed house in a mean street. Still, I thought I had better go and see. Next day about six o'clock I took a cab to the Rue des Moines, but dismissed it at the corner, since I preferred to walk to the hotel and look at it before I went in. It was a street of small shops subservient to the needs of poor people, and about the middle of it, on the left as I walked down, was the Hôtel des Belges. My own hotel was modest enough, but it was magnificent in comparison with this. It was a tall, shabby building, that cannot have been painted for years, and it had so bedraggled an air that the houses on each side of it looked neat and clean. The dirty windows were all shut. It was not here that Charles Strickland lived in guilty splendour with the unknown charmer for whose sake he had abandoned honour and duty. I was vexed, for I felt that I had been made a fool of, and I nearly turned away without making an enquiry. I went in only to be able to tell Mrs. Strickland that I had done my best.

The door was at the side of a shop. It stood open, and just within was a sign: *Bureau au premier*. I walked up narrow stairs, and on the landing found a sort of box, glassed in, within which were a desk and a couple of chairs. There was a bench outside, on which it might be presumed the night porter passed uneasy nights. There was no one about, but under an electric bell was written *Garçon*. I rang, and presently a waiter appeared. He was a young man with furtive eyes and a sullen look. He was in shirt-sleeves and carpet slippers.

I do not know why I made my enquiry as casual as possible.

"Does Mr. Strickland live here by any chance?" I asked.

"Number thirty-two. On the sixth floor."

I was so surprised that for a moment I did not answer.

"Is he in?"

The waiter looked at a board in the *bureau*.

"He hasn't left his key. Go up and you'll see."

I thought it as well to put one more question.

"*Madame est là?*"

"*Monsieur est seul.*"

The waiter looked at me suspiciously as I made my way upstairs. They were dark and airless. There was a foul and musty smell. Three flights up a woman in a dressing-gown, with touzled hair, opened a door and looked at me silently as I passed. At length I

reached the sixth floor, and knocked at the door numbered thirty-two. There was a sound within, and the door was partly opened. Charles Strickland stood before me. He uttered not a word. He evidently did not know me.

I told him my name. I tried my best to assume an airy manner.

"You don't remember me. I had the pleasure of dining with you last July."

"Come in," he said cheerily. "I'm delighted to see you. Take a pew."

I entered. It was a very small room, overcrowded with furniture of the style which the French know as Louis Philippe. There was a large wooden bedstead on which was a billowing red eiderdown, and there was a large wardrobe, a round table, a very small washstand, and two stuffed chairs covered with red rep. Everything was dirty and shabby. There was no sign of the abandoned luxury that Colonel MacAndrew had so confidently described. Strickland threw on the floor the clothes that burdened one of the chairs, and I sat down on it.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

In that small room he seemed even bigger than I remembered him. He wore an old Norfolk jacket, and he had not shaved for several days. When last I saw him he was spruce enough, but he looked ill at ease: now, untidy and ill-kempt, he looked perfectly at home. I did not know how he would take the remark I had prepared.

"I've come to see you on behalf of your wife."

"I was just going out to have a drink before dinner. You'd better come too. Do you like absinthe?"

"I can drink it."

"Come on, then."

He put on a bowler hat much in need of brushing.

"We might dine together. You owe me a dinner, you know."

"Certainly. Are you alone?"

I flattered myself that I had got in that important question very naturally.

"Oh yes. In point of fact I've not spoken to a soul for three days. My French isn't exactly brilliant."

I wondered as I preceded him downstairs what had happened to the little lady in the tea-shop. Had they quarrelled already, or was his infatuation passed? It seemed hardly likely if, as appeared, he had been taking steps for a year to make his desperate

plunge. We walked to the Avenue de Clichy, and sat down at one of the tables on the pavement of a large café.

CHAPTER XII

THE Avenue de Clichy was crowded at that hour, and a lively fancy might see in the passers-by the personages of many a sordid romance. There were clerks and shop-girls; old fellows who might have stepped out of the pages of Honoré de Balzac; members male and female, of the professions which make their profit of the frailties of mankind. There is in the streets of the poorer quarters of Paris a thronging vitality which excites the blood and prepares the soul for the unexpected.

"Do you know Paris well?" I asked.

"No. We came on our honeymoon. I haven't been since."

"How on earth did you find out your hotel?"

"It was recommended to me. I wanted something cheap."

The absinthe came, and with due solemnity we dropped water over the melting sugar.

"I thought I'd better tell you at once why I had come to see you," I said, not without embarrassment.

His eyes twinkled.

"I thought somebody would come along sooner or later. I've had a lot of letters from Amy."

"Then you know pretty well what I've got to say."

"I've not read them."

I lit a cigarette to give myself a moment's time. I did not quite know how to set about my mission. The eloquent phrases I had arranged, pathetic or indignant, seemed out of place on the Avenue de Clichy. Suddenly he gave a chuckle.

"Beastly job for you this, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know," I answered.

"Well, look here, you get it over, and then we'll have a jolly evening."

I hesitated.

"Has it occurred to you that your wife is frightfully unhappy?"

"She'll get over it."

I cannot describe the extraordinary callousness with which he made this reply. It disconcerted me, but I did my best not to

show it. I adopted the tone used by my Uncle Henry, a clergyman, when he was asking one of his relatives for a subscription to the Additional Curates Society.

"You don't mind my talking to you frankly?"

He shook his head, smiling.

"Has she deserved that you should treat her like this?"

"No."

"Have you any complaint to make against her?"

"None."

"Then, isn't it monstrous to leave her in this fashion, after seventeen years of married life, without a fault to find with her?"

"Monstrous."

I glanced at him with surprise. His cordial agreement with all I said cut the ground from under my feet. It made my position complicated, not to say ludicrous. I was prepared to be persuasive, touching, and hortatory, admonitory and expostulating, if need be vituperative even, indignant and sarcastic; but what the devil does a mentor do when the sinner makes no bones about confessing his sin? I had no experience, since my own practice has always been to deny everything.

"What, then?" asked Strickland.

I tried to curl my lip.

"Well, if you acknowledge that, there doesn't seem much more to be said."

"I don't think there is."

I felt that I was not carrying out my embassy with any great skill. I was distinctly nettled.

"Hang it all, one can't leave a woman without a bob."

"Why not?"

"How is she going to live?"

"I've supported her for seventeen years. Why shouldn't she support herself for a change?"

"She can't."

"Let her try."

Of course there were many things I might have answered to this. I might have spoken of the economic position of woman, of the contract, tacit and overt, which a man accepts by his marriage, and of much else; but I felt that there was only one point which really signified.

"Don't you care for her any more?"

"Not a bit," he replied.

The matter was immensely serious for all the parties concerned, but there was in the manner of his answers such a cheerful effrontery that I had to bite my lips in order not to laugh. I reminded myself that his behaviour was abominable. I worked myself up into a state of moral indignation.

"Damn it all, there are your children to think of. They've never done you any harm. They didn't ask to be brought into the world. If you chuck everything like this, they'll be thrown on the streets."

"They've had a good many years of comfort. It's much more than the majority of children have. Besides, somebody will look after them. When it comes to the point, the MacAndrews will pay for their schooling."

"But aren't you fond of them? They're such awfully nice kids. Do you mean to say you don't want to have anything more to do with them?"

"I liked them all right when they were kids, but now they're growing up I haven't got any particular feeling for them."

"It's just inhuman."

"I dare say."

"You don't seem in the least ashamed."

"I'm not."

I tried another tack.

"Everyone will think you a perfect swine."

"Let them."

"Won't it mean anything to you to know that people loathe and despise you?"

"No."

His brief answer was so scornful that it made my question, natural though it was, seem absurd. I reflected for a minute or two.

"I wonder if one can live quite comfortably when one's conscious of the disapproval of one's fellows? Are you sure it won't begin to worry you? Everyone has some sort of conscience, and sooner or later it will find you out. Supposing your wife died, wouldn't you be tortured by remorse?"

He did not answer, and I waited for some time for him to speak. At last I had to break the silence myself.

"What have you to say to that?"

"Only that you're a damned fool."

"At all events, you can be forced to support your wife and children," I retorted, somewhat piqued. "I suppose the law has some protection to offer them."

"Can the law get blood out of a stone? I haven't any money. I've got about a hundred pounds."

I began to be more puzzled than before. It was true that his hotel pointed to the most straitened circumstances.

"What are you going to do when you've spent that?"

"Earn some."

He was perfectly cool, and his eyes kept that mocking smile which made all I said seem rather foolish. I paused for a little while to consider what I had better say next. But it was he who spoke first.

"Why doesn't Amy marry again? She's comparatively young, and she's not unattractive. I can recommend her as an excellent wife. If she wants to divorce me I don't mind giving her the necessary grounds."

Now it was my turn to smile. He was very cunning, but it was evidently this that he was aiming at. He had some reason to conceal the fact that he had run away with a woman, and he was using every precaution to hide her whereabouts. I answered with decision.

"Your wife says that nothing you can do will ever induce her to divorce you. She's quite made up her mind. You can put any possibility of that definitely out of your head."

He looked at me with an astonishment that was certainly not feigned. The smile abandoned his lips, and he spoke quite seriously.

"But, my dear fellow, I don't care. It doesn't matter a twopenny damn to me one way or the other."

I laughed.

"Oh, come now; you musn't think us such fools as all that. We happen to know that you came away with a woman."

He gave a little start, and then suddenly burst into a shout of laughter. He laughed so uproariously that the people sitting near us looked round, and some of them began to laugh too.

"I don't see anything very amusing in that."

"Poor Amy," he grinned.

Then his face grew bitterly scornful.

"What poor minds women have got! Love. It's always love. They think a man leaves them only because he wants others. Do you think I should be such a fool as to do what I've done for a woman?"

"Do you mean to say you didn't leave your wife for another woman?"

"Of course not."

"On your word of honour?"

I don't know why I asked for that. It was very ingenuous of me.

"On my word of honour."

"Then, what in God's name have you left her for?"

"I want to paint."

I looked at him for quite a long time. I did not understand. I thought he was mad. It must be remembered that I was very young, and I looked upon him as a middle-aged man. I forgot everything but my own amazement.

"But you're forty."

"That's what made me think it was high time to begin."

"Have you ever painted?"

"I rather wanted to be a painter when I was a boy, but my father made me go into business because he said there was no money in art. I began to paint a bit a year ago. For the last year I've been going to some classes at night."

"Was that where you went when Mrs. Strickland thought you were playing bridge at your club?"

"That's it."

"Why didn't you tell her?"

"I preferred to keep it to myself."

"Can you paint?"

"Not yet. But I shall. That's why I've come over here. I couldn't get what I wanted in London. Perhaps I can here."

"Do you think it's likely that a man will do any good when he starts at your age? Most men begin painting at eighteen."

"I can learn quicker than I could when I was eighteen."

"What makes you think you have any talent?"

He did not answer for a minute. His gaze rested on the passing throng, but I do not think he saw it. His answer was no answer.

"I've got to paint."

"Aren't you taking an awful chance?"

He looked at me then. His eyes had something strange in them, so that I felt rather uncomfortable.

"How old are you? Twenty-three?"

It seemed to me that the question was beside the point. It was natural that I should take chances; but he was a man whose youth was past, a stockbroker with a position of respectability,

a wife and two children. A course that would have been natural for me was absurd for him. I wished to be quite fair.

"Of course a miracle may happen, and you may be a great painter, but you must confess the chances are a million to one against it. It'll be an awful sell if at the end you have to acknowledge you've made a hash of it."

"I've got to paint," he repeated.

"Supposing you're never anything more than third-rate, do you think it will have been worth while to give up everything? After all, in any other walk of life it doesn't matter if you're not very good: you can get along quite comfortably if you're just adequate; but it's different with an artist."

"You blasted fool," he said.

"I don't see why, unless it's folly to say the obvious."

"I tell you I've got to paint. I can't help myself. When a man falls into the water it doesn't matter how he swims, well or badly: he's got to get out or else he'll drown."

There was real passion in his voice, and in spite of myself I was impressed. I seemed to feel in him some vehement power that was struggling within him; it gave me the sensation of something very strong, overmastering, that held him, as it were, against his will. I could not understand. He seemed really to be possessed of a devil, and I felt that it might suddenly turn and rend him. Yet he looked ordinary enough. My eyes, resting on him curiously, caused him no embarrassment. I wondered what a stranger would have taken him to be, sitting there in his old Norfolk jacket and his unbrushed bowler; his trousers were baggy, his hands were not clean; and his face, with the red stubble of the unshaved chin, the little eyes, and the large, aggressive nose, was uncouth and coarse. His mouth was large, his lips were heavy and sensual. No; I could not have placed him.

"You won't go back to your wife?" I said at last.

"Never."

"She's willing to forget everything that's happened and start afresh. She'll never make you a single reproach."

"She can go to hell."

"You don't care if people think you an utter blackguard? You don't care if she and your children have to beg their bread?"

"Not a damn."

I was silent for a moment in order to give greater force to my next remark. I spoke as deliberately as I could.

"You are a most unmitigated cad."

"Now that you've got that off your chest, let's go and have dinner."

CHAPTER XIII

I DARE say it would have been more seemly to decline this proposal. I think perhaps I should have made a show of the indignation I really felt, and I am sure that Colonel MacAndrew at least would have thought well of me if I had been able to report my stout refusal to sit at the same table with a man of such character. But the fear of not being able to carry it through effectively has always made me shy of assuming the moral attitude; and in this case the certainty that my sentiments would be lost on Strickland made it peculiarly embarrassing to utter them. Only the poet or the saint can water an asphalt pavement in the confident anticipation that lilies will reward his labour.

I paid for what we had drunk, and we made our way to a cheap restaurant, crowded and gay, where we dined with pleasure. I had the appetite of youth and he of a hardened conscience. Then we went to a tavern to have coffee and liqueurs.

I had said all I had to say on the subject that had brought me to Paris, and though I felt it in a manner treacherous to Mrs. Strickland not to pursue it, I could not struggle against his indifference. It requires the feminine temperament to repeat the same thing three times with unabated zest. I solaced myself by thinking that it would be useful for me to find out what I could about Strickland's state of mind. It also interested me much more. But this was not an easy thing to do, for Strickland was not a fluent talker. He seemed to express himself with difficulty, as though words were not the medium with which his mind worked; and you had to guess the intentions of his soul by hackneyed phrases, slang, and vague, unfinished gestures. But though he said nothing of any consequence, there was something in his personality which prevented him from being dull. Perhaps it was sincerity. He did not seem to care much about the Paris he was now seeing for the first time (I did not count the visit with his wife), and he accepted sights which must have been strange to him without any sense of astonishment. I have been to Paris a hundred times, and it never fails to give me a thrill of excitement; I can never walk its streets

without feeling myself on the verge of adventure. Strickland remained placid. Looking back, I think now that he was blind to everything but to some disturbing vision in his soul.

One rather absurd incident took place. There were a number of harlots in the tavern: some were sitting with men, others by themselves; and presently I noticed that one of these was looking at us. When she caught Strickland's eye she smiled. I do not think he saw her. In a little while she went out, but in a minute returned and, passing our table, very politely asked us to buy her something to drink. She sat down and I began to chat with her; but it was plain that her interest was in Strickland. I explained that he knew no more than two words of French. She tried to talk to him, partly by signs, partly in pidgin French, which, for some reason, she thought would be more comprehensible to him, and she had half a dozen phrases of English. She made me translate what she could only express in her own tongue, and eagerly asked for the meaning of his replies. He was quite good-tempered, a little amused, but his indifference was obvious.

"I think you've made a conquest," I laughed.

"I'm not flattered."

In his place I should have been more embarrassed and less calm. She had laughing eyes and a most charming mouth. She was young. I wondered what she found so attractive in Strickland. She made no secret of her desires, and I was bidden to translate.

"She wants you to go home with her."

"I'm not taking any," he replied.

I put his answer as pleasantly as I could. It seemed to me a little ungracious to decline an invitation of that sort, and I ascribed his refusal to lack of money.

"But I like him," she said. "Tell him it's for love."

When I translated this, Strickland shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Tell her to go to hell," he said.

His manner made his answer quite plain, and the girl threw back her head with a sudden gesture. Perhaps she reddened under her paint. She rose to her feet.

"*Monsieur n'est pas poli*," she said.

She walked out of the inn. I was slightly vexed.

"There wasn't any need to insult her that I can see," I said.

"After all, it was rather a compliment she was paying you."

"That sort of thing makes me sick," he said roughly.

I looked at him curiously. There was real distaste in his face, and yet it was the face of a coarse and sensual man. I suppose the girl had been attracted by a certain brutality in it.

"I could have got all the women I wanted in London. I didn't come here for that."

CHAPTER XIV

DURING the journey back to England I thought much of Strickland. I tried to set in order what I had to tell his wife. It was unsatisfactory, and I could not imagine that she would be content with me; I was not content with myself. Strickland perplexed me. I could not understand his motives. When I had asked him what first gave him the idea of being a painter, he was unable or unwilling to tell me. I could make nothing of it. I tried to persuade myself that an obscure feeling of revolt had been gradually coming to a head in his slow mind, but to challenge this was the undoubted fact that he had never shown any impatience with the monotony of his life. If, seized by an intolerable boredom, he had determined to be a painter merely to break with irksome ties, it would have been comprehensible, and commonplace; but commonplace is precisely what I felt he was not. At last, because I was romantic, I devised an explanation which I acknowledge to be far-fetched, but which was the only one that in any way satisfied me. It was this: I asked myself whether there was not in his soul some deep-rooted instinct of creation, which the circumstances of his life had obscured, but which grew relentlessly, as a cancer may grow in the living tissues, till at last it took possession of his whole being and forced him irresistibly to action. The cuckoo lays its egg in the strange bird's nest, and when the young one is hatched it shoulders its foster-brothers out and breaks at last the nest that has sheltered it.

But how strange it was that the creative instinct should seize upon this dull stockbroker, to his own ruin, perhaps, and to the misfortune of such as were dependent on him; and yet no stranger than the way in which the spirit of God has seized men, powerful and rich, pursuing them with stubborn vigilance till at last, conquered, they have abandoned the joy of the world and the love of women for the painful austerities of the cloister. Conversion

may come under many shapes, and it may be brought about in many ways. With some men it needs a cataclysm, as a stone may be broken to fragments by the fury of a torrent; but with some it comes gradually, as a stone may be worn away by the ceaseless fall of a drop of water. Strickland had the directness of the fanatic and the ferocity of the apostle.

But to my practical mind it remained to be seen whether the passion which obsessed him would be justified of its works. When I asked him what his brother-students at the night classes he had attended in London thought of his painting, he answered with a grin:

"They thought it a joke."

"Have you begun to go to a studio here?"

"Yes. The blighter came round this morning—the master, you know; when he saw my drawing he just raised his eyebrows and walked on."

Strickland chuckled. He did not seem discouraged. He was independent of the opinion of his fellows.

And it was just that which had most disconcerted me in my dealings with him. When people say they do not care what others think of them, for the most part they deceive themselves. Generally they mean only that they will do as they choose, in the confidence that no one will know their vagaries; and at the utmost only that they are willing to act contrary to the opinion of the majority because they are supported by the approval of their neighbours. It is not difficult to be unconventional in the eyes of the world when your unconventionality is but the convention of your set. It affords you then an inordinate amount of self-esteem. You have the self-satisfaction of courage without the inconvenience of danger. But the desire for approbation is perhaps the most deeply seated instinct of civilised man. No one runs so hurriedly to the cover of respectability as the unconventional woman who has exposed herself to the slings and arrows of outraged propriety. I do not believe the people who tell me they do not care a row of pins for the opinion of their fellows. It is the bravado of ignorance. They mean only that they do not fear reproaches for peccadillos which they are convinced none will discover.

But here was a man who sincerely did not mind what people thought of him, and so convention had no hold on him; he was like a wrestler whose body is oiled; you could not get a grip

on him; it gave him a freedom which was an outrage. I remember saying to him:

"Look here, if everyone acted like you, the world couldn't go on."

"That's a damned silly thing to say. Everyone doesn't want to act like me. The great majority are perfectly content to do the ordinary thing."

And once I sought to be satirical.

"You evidently don't believe in the maxim: Act so that every one of your actions is capable of being made into a universal rule."

"I never heard it before, but it's rotten nonsense."

"Well, it was Kant who said it."

"I don't care; it's rotten nonsense."

Nor with such a man could you expect the appeal to conscience to be effective. You might as well ask for a reflection without a mirror. I take it that conscience is the guardian in the individual of the rules which the community has evolved for its own preservation. It is the policeman in all our hearts, set there to watch that we do not break its laws. It is the spy seated in the central stronghold of the ego. Man's desire for the approval of his fellows is so strong, his dread of their censure so violent, that himself has brought his enemy within his gates; and it keeps watch over him, vigilant always in the interests of its master to crush any half-formed desire to break away from the herd. It will force him to place the good of society before his own. It is the very strong link that attaches the individual to the whole. And man, subservient to interests he has persuaded himself are greater than his own, makes himself a slave to his taskmaster. He sits him in a seat of honour. At last, like a courtier fawning on the royal stick that is laid about his shoulders, he prides himself on the sensitiveness of his conscience. Then he has no words hard enough for the man who does not recognise its sway; for, a member of society now, he realises accurately enough that against him he is powerless. When I saw that Strickland was really indifferent to the blame his conduct must excite, I could only draw back in horror as from a monster of hardly human shape.

The last words he said to me when I bade him good-night were:

"Tell Amy it's no good coming after me. Anyhow, I shall change my hotel, so she wouldn't be able to find me."

"My own impression is that she's well rid of you," I said.

"My dear fellow, I only hope you'll be able to make her see it. But women are very unintelligent."

CHAPTER XV

WHEN I reached London I found waiting for me an urgent request that I should go to Mrs. Strickland's as soon after dinner as I could. I found her with Colonel MacAndrew and his wife. Mrs. Strickland's sister was older than she, not unlike her, but more faded; and she had the efficient air, as though she carried the British Empire in her pocket, which the wives of senior officers acquire from the consciousness of belonging to a superior caste. Her manner was brisk, and her good breeding scarcely concealed her conviction that if you were not a soldier you might as well be a counter-jumper. She hated the Guards, whom she thought conceited, and she could not trust herself to speak of their ladies, who were so remiss in calling. Her gown was dowdy and expensive.

Mrs. Strickland was plainly nervous.

"Well, tell us your news," she said.

"I saw your husband. I'm afraid he's quite made up his mind not to return." I paused a little. "He wants to paint."

"What do you mean?" cried Mrs. Strickland, with the utmost astonishment.

"Did you never know that he was keen on that sort of thing?"

"He must be as mad as a hatter," exclaimed the colonel.

Mrs. Strickland frowned a little. She was searching among her recollections.

"I remember before we were married he used to potter about with a paint-box. But you never saw such daubs. We used to chaff him. He had absolutely no gift for anything like that."

"Of course it's only an excuse," said Mrs. MacAndrew.

Mrs. Strickland pondered deeply for some time. It was quite clear that she could not make head or tail of my announcement. She had put some order into the drawing-room by now, her housewifely instincts having got the better of her dismay; and it no longer bore that deserted look, like a furnished house long to let, which I had noticed on my first visit after the catastrophe. But now that I had seen Strickland in Paris it was difficult to imagine

him in those surroundings. I thought it could hardly have failed to strike them that there was something incongruous in him.

"But if he wanted to be an artist, why didn't he say so?" asked Mrs. Strickland at last. "I should have thought I was the last person to be unsympathetic to—to aspirations of that kind."

Mrs. MacAndrew tightened her lips. I imagine that she had never looked with approval on her sister's leaning towards persons who cultivated the arts. She spoke of "culchaw" derisively.

Mrs. Strickland continued:

"After all, if he had any talent I should be the first to encourage it. I wouldn't have minded sacrifices. I'd much rather be married to a painter than to a stockbroker. If it weren't for the children, I wouldn't mind anything. I could be just as happy in a shabby studio in Chelsea as in this flat."

"My dear, I have no patience with you," cried Mrs. MacAndrew. "You don't mean to say you believe a word of this nonsense?"

"But I think it's true," I put in mildly.

She looked at me with good-humoured contempt.

"A man doesn't throw up his business and leave his wife and children at the age of forty to become a painter unless there's a woman in it. I suppose he met one of your—artistic friends, and she's turned his head."

A spot of colour rose suddenly to Mrs. Strickland's pale cheeks. "What is she like?"

I hesitated a little. I knew that I had a bombshell.

"There isn't a woman."

Colonel MacAndrew and his wife uttered expressions of incredulity, and Mrs. Strickland sprang to her feet.

"Do you mean to say you never saw her?"

"There's no one to see. He's quite alone."

"That's preposterous," cried Mrs. MacAndrew.

"I knew I ought to have gone over myself," said the colonel.

"You can bet your boots I'd have rooted her out fast enough."

"I wish you had gone over," I replied, somewhat tartly. "You'd have seen that every one of your suppositions was wrong. He's not at a smart hotel. He's living in one tiny room in the most squalid way. If he's left his home, it's not to live a gay life. He's got hardly any money."

"Do you think he's done something that we don't know about, and is lying doggo on account of the police?"

The suggestion sent a ray of hope in all their breasts, but I would have nothing to do with it.

"If that were so, he would hardly have been such a fool as to give his partner his address," I retorted acidly. "Anyhow, there's one thing I'm positive of, he didn't go away with anyone. He's not in love. Nothing is farther from his thoughts."

There was a pause while they reflected over my words.

"Well, if what you say is true," said Mrs. MacAndrew at last, "things aren't so bad as I thought."

Mrs. Strickland glanced at her, but said nothing. She was very pale now, and her fine brow was dark and lowering. I could not understand the expression of her face. Mrs. MacAndrew continued:

"If it's just a whim, he'll get over it."

"Why don't you go over to him, Amy?" hazarded the colonel. "There's no reason why you shouldn't live with him in Paris for a year. We'll look after the children. I dare say he'd got stale. Sooner or later he'll be quite ready to come back to London, and no great harm will have been done."

"I wouldn't do that," said Mrs. MacAndrew. "I'd give him all the rope he wants. He'll come back with his tail between his legs and settle down again quite comfortably." Mrs. MacAndrew looked at her sister coolly. "Perhaps you weren't very wise with him sometimes. Men are queer creatures, and one has to know how to manage them."

Mrs. MacAndrew shared the common opinion of her sex that a man is always a brute to leave a woman who is attached to him, but that a woman is much to blame if he does. *Le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas.*

Mrs. Strickland looked slowly from one to another of us.

"He'll never come back," she said.

"Oh, my dear, remember what we've just heard. He's been used to comfort and to having someone to look after him. How long do you think it'll be before he gets tired of a scrubby room in a scrubby hotel? Besides, he hasn't any money. He must come back."

"As long as I thought he'd run away with some woman I thought there was a chance. I don't believe that sort of thing ever answers. He'd have got sick to death of her in three months. But if he hasn't gone because he's in love, then it's finished."

"Oh, I think that's awfully subtle," said the colonel, putting

into the word all the contempt he felt for a quality so alien to the traditions of his calling. "Don't you believe it. He'll come back, and, as Dorothy says, I dare say he'll be none the worse for having had a bit of a fling."

"But I don't want him back," she said.

"Amy!"

It was anger that had seized Mrs. Strickland, and her pallor was the pallor of a cold and sudden rage. She spoke quickly now, with little gasps.

"I could have forgiven it if he'd fallen desperately in love with someone and gone off with her. I should have thought that natural. I shouldn't really have blamed him. I should have thought he was led away. Men are so weak, and women are so unscrupulous. But this is different. I hate him. I'll never forgive him now."

Colonel MacAndrew and his wife began to talk to her together. They were astonished. They told her she was mad. They could not understand. Mrs. Strickland turned desperately to me.

"Don't you see?" she cried.

"I'm not sure. Do you mean that you could have forgiven him if he'd left you for a woman, but not if he's left you for an idea? You think you're a match for the one, but against the other you're helpless?"

Mrs. Strickland gave me a look in which I read no great friendliness, but did not answer. Perhaps I had struck home. She went on in a low and trembling voice:

"I never knew it was possible to hate anyone as much as I hate him. Do you know, I've been comforting myself by thinking that, however long it lasted he'd want me at the end? I knew when he was dying he'd send for me, and I was ready to go; I'd have nursed him like a mother, and at the last I'd have told him that it didn't matter, I'd loved him always, and I forgave him everything."

I have always been a little disconcerted not exactly by the passion women have for behaving beautifully at the death of a man, but by the love. Sometimes it seems as if they grudge the life he made up for them, and postpone their chance of an effective scene.

"But now—now it's finished. I'm as indifferent to him as if he were a stranger. I should like him to die miserable, poor, and starving, without a friend. I hope he'll rot with some loathsome disease. I've done with him."

I thought it as well then to say what Strickland had suggested.

"If you want to divorce him, he's quite willing to do whatever is necessary to make it possible."

"Why should I give him his freedom?"

"I don't think he wants it. He merely thought it might be more convenient to you."

Mrs. Strickland shrugged her shoulders impatiently. I think I was a little disappointed in her. I expected then people to be more of a piece than I do now, and I was distressed to find so much vindictiveness in so charming a creature. I did not realise how motley are the qualities that go to make up a human being. Now I am well aware that pettiness and grandeur, malice and charity, hatred and love, can find place side by side in the same human heart.

I wondered if there was anything I could say that would ease the sense of bitter humiliation which at present tormented Mrs. Strickland. I thought I would try.

"You know, I'm not sure that your husband is quite responsible for his actions. I do not think he is himself. He seems to me to be possessed by some power which is using him for its own ends, and in whose hold he is as helpless as a fly in a spider's web. It's as though someone had cast a spell over him. I'm reminded of those strange stories one sometimes hears of another personality entering into a man and driving out the old one. The soul lives unstably in the body, and is capable of mysterious transformations. In the old days they would say Charles Strickland had a devil."

Mrs. MacAndrew smoothed down the lap of her gown, and gold bangles fell over her wrists.

"All that seems to me very far-fetched," she said acidly. "I don't deny that perhaps Amy took her husband a little too much for granted. If she hadn't been so busy with her own affairs, I can't believe that she wouldn't have suspected something was the matter. I don't think it's fair to have Alec could have something on his mind for year or more. It'll be before long having a pretty shrewd idea of it."

The colonel? Besides, to vacancy, and I wondered whether anyone could be so innocent of guile as he looked.

"But that doesn't prevent the fact that Charles Strickland is a heartless beast." She looked at me severely. "I can tell you why he left his wife—from pure selfishness and nothing else whatever."

"That is certainly the simplest explanation," I said. But I thought it explained nothing. When, saying I was tired, I rose to go, Mrs. Strickland made no attempt to detain me.

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT followed showed that Mrs. Strickland was a woman of character. Whatever anguish she suffered she concealed. She saw shrewdly that the world is quickly bored by the recital of misfortune, and willingly avoids the sight of distress. Whenever she went out—and compassion for her misadventure made her friends eager to entertain her—she bore a demeanour that was perfect. She was brave, but not too obviously; cheerful, but not brazenly; and she seemed more anxious to listen to the troubles of others than to discuss her own. Whenever she spoke of her husband it was with pity. Her attitude toward him at first perplexed me. One day she said to me:

"You know, I'm convinced you were mistaken about Charles being alone. From what I've been able to gather from certain sources that I can't tell you, I know that he didn't leave England by himself."

"In that case he has a positive genius for covering up his tracks."

She looked away and slightly coloured.

"What I mean is, if anyone talks to you about it, please don't contradict it if they say he eloped with somebody."

"Of course not."

She changed the conversation as though it were a matter to which she attached no importance. I discovered presently that a peculiar story was circulating among her friends. They said that Charles Strickland had become infatuated with a French dancer, whom he had first seen in the ballet at the Empire, and had accompanied her to Paris. I could not find out how this had arisen, but, singularly enough, it created much sympathy for Mrs. Strickland, and at the same time gave her not a little prestige. This was not without its use in the calling which she had decided to follow. Colonel MacAndrew had not exaggerated when he said she would be penniless, and it was necessary for her to earn her living as quickly as she could. She made up her mind to profit by her acquaintance with so many writers and without loss of time began to learn shorthand and typewriting. Her education made it likely that she would be a typist more efficient than the average, and her story made her claims appealing. Her friends promised to send her work, and took care to recommend her to all theirs.

The MacAndrews, who were childless and in easy circumstances, arranged to undertake the care of the children, and Mrs. Strickland had only herself to provide for. She let her flat and sold her furniture. She settled in two tiny rooms in Westminster, and faced the world anew. She was so efficient that it was certain she would make a success of the adventure.

CHAPTER XVII

It was about five years after this that I decided to live in Paris for a while. I was growing stale in London. I was tired of doing much the same thing every day. My friends pursued their course with uneventfulness; they had no longer any surprises for me, and when I met them I knew pretty well what they would say; even their love affairs had a tedious banality. We were like tram-cars running on their lines from terminus to terminus, and it was possible to calculate within small limits the number of passengers they would carry. Life was ordered too pleasantly. I was seized with panic. I gave up my small apartment, sold my few belongings, and resolved to start afresh.

I called on Mrs. Strickland before I left. I had not seen her for some time, and I noticed changes in her; it was not only that she was older, thinner, and more lined; I think her character had altered. She had made a success of her business, and now had an office in Chancery Lane; she did little typing herself, but spent her time correcting the work of the four girls she employed. She had had the idea of giving it a certain daintiness, and she made much use of blue and red inks; she bound the copy in coarse paper, that looked vaguely like watered silk, in various pale colours; and she had acquired a reputation for neatness and accuracy. She was making money. But she could not get over the idea that to earn her living was somewhat undignified, and she was inclined to remind you that she was a lady by birth. She could not help bringing into her conversation the names of people she knew which would satisfy you that she had not sunk in the social scale. She was a little ashamed of her courage and business capacity, but delighted that she was going to dine the next night with a K.C. who lived in South Kensington. She was pleased to be able to tell you that her son was at Cambridge, and it was with a little laugh that

she spoke of the rush of dances to which her daughter, just out, was invited. I suppose I said a very stupid thing.

"Is she going into your business?" I asked.

"Oh no; I wouldn't let her do that," Mrs. Strickland answered. "She's so pretty. I'm sure she'll marry well."

"I should have thought it would be a help to you."

"Several people have suggested that she should go on the stage, but of course I couldn't consent to that. I know all the chief dramatists, and I could get her a part to-morrow, but I shouldn't like her to mix with all sorts of people."

I was a little chilled by Mrs. Strickland's exclusiveness.

"Do you ever hear of your husband?"

"No; I haven't heard a word. He may be dead for all I know."

"I may run across him in Paris. Would you like me to let you know about him?"

She hesitated a minute.

"If he's in any real want I'm prepared to help him a little. I'd send you a certain sum of money, and you could give it him gradually, as he needed it."

"That's very good of you," I said.

But I knew it was not kindness that prompted the offer. It is not true that suffering ennobles the character; happiness does that sometimes, but suffering, for the most part, makes men petty and vindictive.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN point of fact, I met Strickland before I had been a fortnight in Paris.

I quickly found myself a tiny apartment on the fifth floor of a house in the Rue des Dames, and for a couple of hundred francs bought at a second-hand dealer's enough furniture to make it habitable. I arranged with the concierge to make my coffee in the morning and to keep the place clean. Then I went to see my friend Dirk Stroeve.

Dirk Stroeve was one of those persons whom, according to your character, you cannot think of without derisive laughter or an embarrassed shrug of the shoulders. Nature had made him a buffoon. He was a painter, but a very bad one, whom I had met in

Rome, and I still remembered his pictures. He had a genuine enthusiasm for the commonplace. His soul palpitating with love of art, he painted the models who hung about the stairway of Bernini in the Piazza di Spagna, undaunted by their obvious picturesqueness; and his studio was full of canvases on which were portrayed moustachioed, large-eyed peasants in peaked hats, urchins in becoming rags, and women in bright petticoats. Sometimes they lounged at the steps of a church, and sometimes dallied among cypresses against a cloudless sky; sometimes they made love by a Renaissance well-head, and sometimes they wandered through the Campagna by the side of an ox-wagon. They were carefully drawn and carefully painted. A photograph could not have been more exact. One of the painters at the Villa Medici had called him *Le Maître de la Boîte à Chocolats*. To look at his pictures you would have thought that Monet, Manet, and the rest of the Impressionists had never been.

"I don't pretend to be a great painter," he said. "I'm not a Michel Angelo, no, but I have something. I sell. I bring romance into the homes of all sorts of people. Do you know, they buy my pictures not only in Holland, but in Norway and Sweden and Denmark? It's mostly merchants who buy them, and rich tradesmen. You can't imagine what the winters are like in those countries, so long and dark and cold. They like to think that Italy is like my pictures. That's what they expect. That's what I expected Italy to be before I came here."

And I think that was the vision that had remained with him always, dazzling his eyes so that he could not see the truth; and notwithstanding the brutality of fact, he continued to see with the eyes of the spirit an Italy of romantic brigands and picturesque ruins. It was an ideal that he painted—a poor one, common, and shop-soiled, but still it was an ideal; and it gave his character a definite charm.

It was because I felt this that Dirk Stroeve was not to me, as to others, merely an object of ridicule. His fellow-painters made no secret of their contempt for his work, but he earned a fair amount of money, and they did not hesitate to make free use of his purse. He was generous, and the needy, laughing at him because he believed so naïvely their stories of distress, borrowed from him with effrontery. He was very emotional, yet his feeling, so easily aroused, had in it something absurd, so that you accepted his kindness, but felt no gratitude. To take money from him was like

robbing a child, and you despised him because he was so foolish. I imagine that a pickpocket, proud of his light fingers, must feel a sort of indignation with the careless woman who leaves in a cab a vanity-bag with all her jewels in it. Nature had made him a butt, but had denied him insensibility. He writhed under the jokes, practical and otherwise, which were perpetually made at his expense, and yet never ceased, it seemed wilfully, to expose himself to them. He was constantly wounded, and yet his good-nature was such that he could not bear malice: the viper might sting him, but he never learned by experience, and had no sooner recovered from his pain than he tenderly placed it once more in his bosom. His life was a tragedy written in the terms of knock-about farce. Because I did not laugh at him he was grateful to me, and he used to pour into my sympathetic ear the long list of his troubles. The saddest thing about them was that they were grotesque, and the more pathetic they were, the more you wanted to laugh.

But though so bad a painter, he had a very delicate feeling for art, and to go with him to picture galleries was a rare treat. His enthusiasm was sincere and his criticism acute. He was catholic. He had not only a true appreciation of the old masters, but sympathy with the moderns. He was quick to discover talent, and his praise was generous. I think I have never known a man whose judgment was surer. And he was better educated than most painters. He was not, like most of them, ignorant of kindred arts, and his taste for music and literature gave depth and variety to his comprehension of painting. To a young man like myself his advice and guidance were of incomparable value.

When I left Rome I corresponded with him, and about once in two months received from him long letters in queer English, which brought before me vividly his spluttering, enthusiastic, gesticulating conversation. Some time before I went to Paris he had married an Englishwoman, and was now settled in a studio in Montmartre. I had not seen him for four years, and had never met his wife.

CHAPTER XIX

I HAD not announced my arrival to Stroeve, and when I rang the bell of his studio, on opening the door himself, for a moment he

did not know me. Then he gave a cry of delighted surprise and drew me in. It was charming to be welcomed with so much eagerness. His wife was seated near the stove at her sewing, and she rose as I came in. He introduced me.

"Don't you remember?" he said to her. "I've talked to you about him often." And then to me: "But why didn't you let me know you were coming? How long have you been here? How long are you going to stay? Why didn't you come an hour earlier, and we would have dined together?"

He bombarded me with questions. He sat me down in a chair, patting me as though I were a cushion, pressed cigars upon me, cakes, wine. He could not leave me alone. He was heart-broken because he had no whisky, wanted to make coffee for me, racked his brain for something he could possibly do for me, and beamed and laughed, and in the exuberance of his delight sweated at every pore.

"You haven't changed," I said, smiling, as I looked at him.

He had the same absurd appearance that I remembered. He was a fat little man, with short legs, young still—he could not have been more than thirty—but prematurely bald. His face was perfectly round, and he had a very high colour, a white skin, red cheeks, and red lips. His eyes were blue and round, too, he wore large gold-rimmed spectacles, and his eyebrows were so fair you could not see them. He reminded you of those jolly, fat merchants that Rubens painted.

When I told him that I meant to live in Paris for a while, and had taken an apartment, he reproached me bitterly for not having let him know. He would have found me an apartment himself, and lent me furniture—did I really mean that I had gone to the expense of buying it?—and he would have helped me to move in. He really looked upon it as unfriendly that I had not given him the opportunity of making himself useful to me. Meanwhile, Mrs. Stroeve sat quietly, mending her stockings, without talking, and she listened to all he said with a quiet smile on her lips.

"So, you see, I'm married," he said suddenly; "what do you think of my wife?"

He beamed at her, and settled his spectacles on the bridge of his nose. The sweat made them constantly slip down.

"What on earth do you expect me to say to that?" I laughed.

"Really, Dirk," put in Mrs. Stroeve, smiling.

"But isn't she wonderful? I tell you, my boy, lose no time; get

married as soon as ever you can. I'm the happiest man alive. Look at her sitting there. Doesn't she make a picture? Chardin, eh? I've seen all the most beautiful women in the world; I've never seen anyone more beautiful than Madame Dirk Stroeve."

"If you don't be quiet, Dirk, I shall go away."

"*Mon petit choux*," he said.

She flushed a little, embarrassed by the passion in his tone. His letters had told me that he was very much in love with his wife, and I saw that he could hardly take his eyes off her. I could not tell if she loved him. Poor pantaloons, he was not an object to excite love, but the smile in her eyes was affectionate, and it was possible that her reserve concealed a very deep feeling. She was not the ravishing creature that his love-sick fancy saw, but she had a grave comeliness. She was rather tall, and her grey dress, simple and quite well-cut, did not hide the fact that her figure was beautiful. It was a figure that might have appealed more to the sculptor than to the costumier. Her hair, brown and abundant, was plainly done, her face was very pale, and her features were good without being distinguished. She had quiet grey eyes. She just missed being beautiful, and in missing it was not even pretty. But when Stroeve spoke of Chardin it was not without reason, and she reminded me curiously of that pleasant housewife in her mob-cap and apron whom the great painter has immortalised. I could imagine her sedately busy among her pots and pans, making a ritual of her household duties, so that they acquired a moral significance; I did not suppose that she was clever or could ever be amusing, but there was something in her grave intentness which excited my interest. Her reserve was not without mystery. I wondered why she had married Dirk Stroeve. Though she was English, I could not exactly place her, and it was not obvious from what rank in society she sprang, what had been her upbringing, or how she had lived before her marriage. She was very silent, but when she spoke it was with a pleasant voice, and her manners were natural.

I asked Stroeve if he was working.

"Working? I'm painting better than I've ever painted before."

We sat in the studio, and he waved his hand to an unfinished picture on an easel. I gave a little start. He was painting a group of Italian peasants, in the costume of the Campagna, lounging on the steps of a Roman church.

"Is that what you're doing now?" I asked.

"Yes. I can get my models here just as well as in Rome."

"Don't you think it's very beautiful?" said Mrs. Stroeve.

"This foolish wife of mine thinks I'm a great artist," said he.

His apologetic laugh did not disguise the pleasure that he felt. His eyes lingered on the picture. It was strange that his critical sense, so accurate and unconventional when he dealt with the work of others, should be satisfied in himself with what was hackneyed and vulgar beyond belief.

"Show him some more of your pictures," she said.

"Shall I?"

Though he had suffered so much from the ridicule of his friends, Dirk Stroeve, eager for praise and naively self-satisfied, could never resist displaying his work. He brought out a picture of two curly-headed Italian urchins playing marbles.

"Aren't they sweet?" said Mrs. Stroeve.

And then he showed me more. I discovered that in Paris he had been painting just the same stale, obviously picturesque things that he had painted for years in Rome. It was all false, insincere, shoddy; and yet no one was more honest, sincere, and frank than Dirk Stroeve. Who could resolve the contradiction?

I do not know what put it into my head to ask:

"I say, have you by any chance run across a painter called Charles Strickland?"

"You don't mean to say you know him?" cried Stroeve.

"Beast," said his wife.

Stroeve laughed.

"*Ma pauvre chérie.*" He went over to her and kissed both her hands. "She doesn't like him. How strange that you should know Strickland!"

"I don't like bad manners," said Mrs. Stroeve.

Dirk, laughing still, turned to me to explain.

"You see, I asked him to come here one day and look at my pictures. Well, he came, and I showed him everything I had." Stroeve hesitated a moment with embarrassment. I do not know why he had begun the story against himself; he felt an awkwardness at finishing it. "He looked at—at my pictures, and he didn't say anything. I thought he was reserving his judgment till the end. And at last I said: 'There, that's the lot!' He said: 'I came to ask you to lend me twenty francs.' "

"And Dirk actually gave it him," said his wife indignantly.

"I was so taken aback. I didn't like to refuse. He put the

money in his pocket, just nodded, said "Thanks", and walked out."

Dirk Stroeve, telling the story, had such a look of blank astonishment on his round, foolish face that it was almost impossible not to laugh.

"I shouldn't have minded if he'd said my pictures were bad, but he said nothing—nothing."

"And you will tell the story, Dirk," said his wife.

It was lamentable that one was more amused by the ridiculous figure cut by the Dutchman than outraged by Strickland's brutal treatment of him.

"I hope I shall never see him again," said Mrs. Stroeve.

Stroeve smiled and shrugged his shoulders. He had already recovered his good humour.

"The fact remains that he's a great artist, a very great artist."

"Strickland?" I exclaimed. "It can't be the same man."

"A big fellow with a red beard. Charles Strickland. An Englishman."

"He had no beard when I knew him, but if he has grown one it might well be red. The man I'm thinking of only began painting five years ago."

"That's it. He's a great artist."

"Impossible."

"Have I ever been mistaken?" Dirk asked me. "I tell you he has genius. I'm convinced of it. In a hundred years if you and I are remembered at all, it will be because we knew Charles Strickland."

I was astonished, and at the same time I was very much excited. I remembered suddenly my last talk with him.

"Where can one see his work?" I asked. "Is he having any success? Where is he living?"

"No; he has no success. I don't think he's ever sold a picture. When you speak to men about him they only laugh. But I *know* he's a great artist. After all, they laughed at Manet. Corot never sold a picture. I don't know where he lives, but I can take you to see him. He goes to a café in the Avenue de Clichy at seven o'clock every evening. If you like we'll go there to-morrow."

"I'm not sure if he'll wish to see me. I think I may remind him of a time he prefers to forget. But I'll come all the same. Is there any chance of seeing any of his pictures?"

"Not from him. He won't show you a thing. There's a little dealer I know who has two or three. But you mustn't go without me, you wouldn't understand. I must show them to you myself."

"Dirk, you make me impatient," said Mrs. Stroeve. "How can you talk like that about his pictures when he treated you as he did?" She turned to me. "Do you know, when some Dutch people came here to buy Dirk's pictures he tried to persuade them to buy Strickland's? He insisted on bringing them here to show."

"What did you think of them?" I asked her, smiling.

"They were awful."

"Ah, sweetheart, you don't understand."

"Well, your Dutch people were furious with you. They thought you were having a joke with them."

Dirk Stroeve took off his spectacles and wiped them. His flushed face was shining with excitement.

"Why should you think that beauty, which is the most precious thing in the world, lies like a stone on the beach for the careless passer-by to pick up idly? Beauty is something wonderful and strange that the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the torment of his soul. And when he has made it, it is not given to all to know it. To recognise it you must repeat the adventure of the artist. It is a melody that he sings to you, and to hear it again in your own heart you want knowledge and sensitiveness and imagination."

"Why did I always think your pictures beautiful, Dirk? I admired them the very first time I saw them."

Stroeve's lips trembled a little.

"Go to bed, my precious. I will walk a few steps with our friend, and then I will come back."

CHAPTER XX

DIRK STROEVE agreed to fetch me on the following evening and take me to the café at which Strickland was most likely to be found. I was interested to learn that it was the same as that at which Strickland and I had drunk absinthe when I had gone over to Paris to see him. The fact that he had never changed suggested a sluggishness of habit which seemed to me characteristic.

"There he is," said Stroeve, as we reached the café.

Though it was October, the evening was warm, and the tables on the pavement were crowded. I ran my eyes over them, but did not see Strickland.

"Look. Over there, in the corner. He's playing chess."

I noticed a man bending over a chess-board, but could see only a large felt hat and a red beard. We threaded our way among the tables till we came to him.

"Strickland."

He looked up.

"Hulloa, fatty. What do you want?"

"I've brought an old friend to see you."

Strickland gave me a glance, and evidently did not recognise me. He resumed his scrutiny of the chess-board.

"Sit down, and don't make a noise," he said.

He moved a piece and straightway became absorbed in the game. Poor Stroeve gave me a troubled look, but I was not disconcerted by so little. I ordered something to drink, and waited quietly till Strickland had finished. I welcomed the opportunity to examine him at my ease. I certainly should never have known him. In the first place his red beard, ragged and untrimmed, hid much of his face, and his hair was long; but the most surprising change in him was his extreme thinness. It made his great nose protrude more arrogantly; it emphasised his cheek-bones; it made his eyes seem larger. There were deep hollows at his temples. His body was cadaverous. He wore the same suit that I had seen him in five years before; it was torn and stained, threadbare, and it hung upon him loosely, as though it had been made for someone else. I noticed his hands, dirty, with long nails; they were merely bone and sinew, large and strong; but I had forgotten that they were so shapely. He gave me an extraordinary impression as he sat there, his attention riveted on his game—an impression of great strength; and I could not understand why it was that his emaciation somehow made it more striking.

Presently, after moving, he leaned back and gazed with a curious abstraction at his antagonist. This was a fat, bearded Frenchman. The Frenchman considered the position, then broke suddenly into jovial expletives, and with an impatient gesture, gathering up the pieces, flung them into their box. He cursed Strickland freely, then, calling for the waiter, paid for the drinks, and left. Stroeve drew his chair closer to the table.

"Now I suppose we can talk," he said.

Strickland's eyes rested on him, and there was in them a malicious expression. I felt sure he was seeking for some gibe, could think of none, and so was forced to silence.

"I've brought an old friend to see you," repeated Stroeve, beaming cheerfully.

Strickland looked at me thoughtfully for nearly a minute. I did not speak.

"I've never seen him in my life," he said.

I do not know why he said this, for I felt certain I had caught a gleam of recognition in his eyes. I was not so easily abashed as I had been some years earlier.

"I saw your wife the other day," I said. "I felt sure you'd like to have the latest news of her."

He gave a short laugh. His eyes twinkled.

"We had a jolly evening together," he said. "How long ago is it?"

"Five years."

He called for another absinthe. Stroeve, with voluble tongue, explained how he and I had met, and by what an accident we discovered that we both knew Strickland. I do not know if Strickland listened. He glanced at me once or twice reflectively, but for the most part seemed occupied with his own thoughts; and certainly without Stroeve's babble the conversation would have been difficult. In half an hour the Dutchman, looking at his watch, announced that he must go. He asked whether I would come too. I thought, alone, I might get something out of Strickland, and so answered that I would stay.

When the fat man had left I said:

"Dirk Stroeve thinks you're a great artist."

"What the hell do you suppose I care?"

"Will you let me see your pictures?"

"Why should I?"

"I might feel inclined to buy one."

"I might not feel inclined to sell one."

"Are you making a good living?" I asked, smiling. He chuckled.

"Do I look it?"

"You look half starved."

"I am half starved."

"Then come and let's have a bit of dinner."

"Why do you ask me?"

"Not out of charity," I answered coolly. "I don't really care a twopenny damn if you starve or not."

His eyes lit up again.

"Come on, then," he said, getting up. "I'd like a decent meal."

CHAPTER XXI

I LET him take me to a restaurant of his choice, but on the way I bought a paper. When we had ordered our dinner, I propped it against a bottle of St. Galmier and began to read. We ate in silence. I felt him looking at me now and again, but I took no notice. I meant to force him to conversation.

"Is there anything in the paper?" he said, as we approached the end of our silent meal.

I fancied there was in his tone a slight note of exasperation.

"I always like to read the *feuilleton* on the drama," I said.

I folded the paper and put it down beside me.

"I've enjoyed my dinner," he remarked.

"I think we might have our coffee here, don't you?"

"Yes."

We lit our cigars. I smoked in silence. I noticed that now and then his eyes rested on me with a faint smile of amusement. I waited patiently.

"What have you been up to since I saw you last?" he asked at length.

I had not very much to say. It was a record of hard work and of little adventure; of experiments in this direction and in that; of the gradual acquisition of the knowledge of books and of men. I took care to ask Strickland nothing about his own doings. I showed not the least interest in him, and at last I was rewarded. He began to talk of himself. But with his poor gift of expression he gave but indications of what he had gone through, and I had to fill up the gaps with my own imagination. It was tantalising to get no more than hints into a character that interested me so much. It was like making one's way through a mutilated manuscript. I received the impression of a life which was a bitter struggle against every sort of difficulty; but I realised that much which would have seemed horrible to most people did not in the least affect him. Strickland was distinguished from most Englishmen by his perfect indifference to comfort; it did not irk him to live always in one shabby room; he had no need to be surrounded by beautiful things. I do not suppose he had ever noticed how dingy was the paper on the wall of the room in which on my first visit I found him. He did not want arm-chairs to sit in; he really felt more at his ease on a kitchen chair. He ate with appetite, but was indifferent

to what he ate; to him it was only food that he devoured to still the pangs of hunger; and when no food was to be had he seemed capable of doing without it. I learned that for six months he had lived on a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk a day. He was a sensual man, and yet was indifferent to sensual things. He looked upon privation as no hardship. There was something impressive in the manner in which he lived a life wholly of the spirit.

When the small sum of money which he brought with him from London came to an end he suffered from no dismay. He sold no pictures; I think he made little attempt to sell any; he set about finding some way to make a bit of money. He told me with grim humour of the time he had spent acting as guide to Cockneys who wanted to see the night side of life in Paris; it was an occupation that appealed to his sardonic temper; and somehow or other he had acquired a wide acquaintance with the more disreputable quarters of the city. He told me of the long hours he spent walking about the Boulevard de la Madeleine on the look-out for Englishmen, preferably the worse for liquor, who desired to see things which the law forbade. When in luck he was able to make a tidy sum; but the shabbiness of his clothes at last frightened the sightseers, and he could not find people adventurous enough to trust themselves to him. Then he happened on a job to translate the advertisements of patent medicines which were sent broadcast to the medical profession in England. During a strike he had been employed as a house-painter.

Meanwhile he had never ceased to work at his art; but, soon tiring of the studios, entirely by himself. He had never been so poor that he could not buy canvas and paint, and really he needed nothing else. So far as I could make out, he painted with great difficulty, and in his unwillingness to accept help from anyone lost much time in finding out for himself the solution of technical problems which preceding generations had already worked out one by one. He was aiming at something, I knew not what, and perhaps he hardly knew himself; and I got again more strongly the impression of a man possessed. He did not seem quite sane. It seemed to me that he would not show his pictures because he was really not interested in them. He lived in a dream, and the reality meant nothing to him. I had the feeling that he worked on a canvas with all the force of his violent personality, oblivious of everything in his effort to get what he saw with the mind's eye; and then, having finished, not the picture perhaps, for I had an idea

that he seldom brought anything to completion, but the passion that fired him, he lost all care for it. He was never satisfied with what he had done; it seemed to him of no consequence compared with the vision that obsessed his mind.

"Why don't you ever send your work to exhibitions?" I asked. "I should have thought you'd like to know what people thought about it."

"Would you?"

I cannot describe the unmeasurable contempt he put into the two words.

"Don't you want fame? It's something that most artists haven't been indifferent to."

"Children. How can you care for the opinion of the crowd, when you don't care twopence for the opinion of the individual?"

"We're not all reasonable beings," I laughed.

"Who makes fame? Critics, writers, stockbrokers, women."

"Wouldn't it give you a rather pleasant sensation to think of people you didn't know and had never seen receiving emotions, subtle and passionate, from the work of your hands? Everyone likes power. I can't imagine a more wonderful exercise of it than to move the souls of men to pity or terror."

"Melodrama."

"Why do you mind if you paint well or badly?"

"I don't. I only want to paint what I see."

"I wonder if I could write on a desert island, with the certainty that no eyes but mine would ever see what I had written."

Strickland did not speak for a long time, but his eyes shone strangely, as though he saw something that kindled his soul to ecstasy.

"Sometimes I've thought of an island lost in a boundless sea, where I could live in some hidden valley, among strange trees, in silence. There I think I could find what I want."

He did not express himself quite like this. He used gestures instead of adjectives, and he halted. I have put into my own words what I think he wanted to say.

"Looking back on the last five years, do you think it was worth it?" I asked.

He looked at me, and I saw that he did not know what I meant. I explained.

"You gave up a comfortable home and a life as happy as the average. You were fairly prosperous. You seem to have had a

rotten time in Paris. If you had your time over again would you do what you did?"

"Rather."

"Do you know that you haven't asked anything about your wife and children? Do you ever think of them?"

"No."

"I wish you weren't so damned monosyllabic. Have you never had a moment's regret for all the unhappiness you caused them?"

His lips broke into a smile, and he shook his head.

"I should have thought sometimes you couldn't help thinking of the past. I don't mean the past of seven or eight years ago, but further back still, when you first met your wife, and loved her, and married her. Don't you remember the joy with which you first took her in your arms?"

"I don't think of the past. The only thing that matters is the everlasting present."

I thought for a moment over this reply. It was obscure, perhaps, but I thought that I saw dimly his meaning.

"Are you happy?" I asked.

"Yes."

I was silent. I looked at him reflectively. He held my stare, and presently a sardonic twinkle lit up his eyes.

"I'm afraid you disapprove of me?"

"Nonsense," I answered promptly; "I don't disapprove of the boa-constrictor; on the contrary, I'm interested in his mental process."

"It's a purely professional interest you take in me?"

"Purely."

"It's only right that you shouldn't disapprove of me. You have a despicable character."

"Perhaps that's why you feel at home with me," I retorted.

He smiled dryly, but said nothing. I wish I knew how to describe his smile. I do not know that it was attractive, but it lit up his face, changing the expression, which was generally sombre, and gave it a look of not ill-natured malice. It was a slow smile, starting and sometimes ending in the eyes; it was very sensual, neither cruel nor kindly, but suggested rather the inhuman glee of the satyr. It was his smile that made me ask him:

"Haven't you been in love since you came to Paris?"

"I haven't got time for that sort of nonsense. Life isn't long enough for love and art."

"Your appearance doesn't suggest the anchorite."

"All that business fills me with disgust."

"Human nature is a nuisance, isn't it?" I said.

"Why are you sniggering at me?"

"Because I don't believe you."

"Then you're a damned fool."

I paused, and I looked at him searchingly.

"What's the good of trying to humbug me?" I said.

"I don't know what you mean."

I smiled.

"Let me tell you. I imagine that for months the matter never comes into your head, and you're able to persuade yourself that you've finished with it for good and all. You rejoice in your freedom, and you feel that at last you can call your soul your own. You seem to walk with your head among the stars. And then, all of a sudden you can't stand it any more, and you notice that all the time your feet have been walking in the mud. And you want to roll yourself in it. And you find some woman, coarse and low and vulgar, some beastly creature in whom all the horror of sex is blatant, and you fall upon her like a wild animal. You drink till you're blind with rage."

He stared at me without the slightest movement. I held his eyes with mine. I spoke very slowly.

"I'll tell you what must seem strange, that when it's over you feel so extraordinarily pure. You feel like a disembodied spirit, immaterial; and you seem to be able to touch beauty as though it were a palpable thing; and you feel an intimate communion with the breeze, and with the trees breaking into leaf, and with the iridescence of the river. You feel like God. Can you explain that to me?"

He kept his eyes fixed on mine till I had finished, and then he turned away. There was on his face a strange look, and I thought that so might a man look when he had died under the torture. He was silent. I knew that our conversation was ended.

CHAPTER XXII

I SETTLED down in Paris and began to write a play. I led a very regular life, working in the morning, and in the afternoon lounging

about the gardens of the Luxembourg or sauntering through the streets. I spent long hours in the Louvre, the most friendly of all galleries and the most convenient for meditation; or idled on the quays, fingering second-hand books that I never meant to buy. I read a page here and there, and made acquaintance with a great many authors whom I was content to know thus desultorily. In the evenings I went to see my friends. I looked in often on the Stroeves, and sometimes shared their modest fare. Dirk Stroeve flattered himself on his skill in cooking Italian dishes, and I confess that his *spaghetti* were very much better than his pictures. It was a dinner for a king when he brought in a huge dish of it, succulent with tomatoes, and we ate it, together with the good household bread and a bottle of red wine. I grew more intimate with Blanche Stroeve, and I think, because I was English and she knew few English people, she was glad to see me. She was pleasant and simple, but she remained always rather silent, and, I knew not why, gave me the impression that she was concealing something. But I thought that was perhaps no more than a natural reserve accentuated by the verbose frankness of her husband. Dirk never concealed anything. He discussed the most intimate matters with a complete lack of self-consciousness. Sometimes he embarrassed his wife, and the only time I saw her put out of countenance was when he insisted on telling me that he had taken a purge, and went into somewhat realistic details on the subject. The perfect seriousness with which he narrated his misfortunes convulsed me with laughter, and this added to Mrs. Stroeve's irritation.

"You seem to like making a fool of yourself," she said.

His round eyes grew rounder still, and his brow puckered in dismay as he saw that she was angry.

"Sweetheart, have I vexed you? I'll never take another. It was only because I was bilious. I lead a sedentary life. I don't take enough exercise. For three days I hadn't . . ."

"For goodness' sake, hold your tongue," she interrupted, tears of annoyance in her eyes.

His face fell, and he pouted his lips like a scolded child. He gave me a look of appeal, so that I might put things right, but, unable to control myself, I shook with helpless laughter.

We went one day to the picture-dealer in whose shop Stroeve thought he could show me at least two or three of Strickland's pictures, but when we arrived were told that Strickland himself had taken them away. The dealer did not know why.

"But don't imagine to yourself that I make myself bad blood on that account. I took them to oblige Monsieur Stroeve, and I said I would sell them if I could. But really——" He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm interested in the young men, but *voilà*, you yourself, Monsieur Stroeve, you don't think there's any talent there."

"I give you my word of honour, there's no one painting to-day in whose talent I am more convinced. Take my word for it, you are missing a good affair. Some day those pictures will be worth more than all you have in your shop. Remember Monet, who could not get anyone to buy his pictures for a hundred francs. What are they worth now?"

"True. But there were a hundred as good painters as Monet who couldn't sell their pictures at that time, and their pictures are worth nothing still. How can one tell? Is merit enough to bring success? Don't believe it. *Du reste*, it has still to be proved that this friend of yours has merit. No one claims it for him but Monsieur Stroeve."

"And how, then, will you recognise merit?" asked Dirk, red in the face with anger.

"There is only one way—by success."

"Philistine!" cried Dirk.

"But think of the great artists of the past—Raphael, Michel Angelo, Ingres, Delacroix—they were all successful."

"Let us go," said Stroeve to me, "or I shall kill this man."

CHAPTER XXIII

I saw Strickland not infrequently, and now and then played chess with him. He was of uncertain temper. Sometimes he would sit silent and abstracted, taking no notice of anyone; and at others, when he was in a good humour, he would talk in his own halting way. He never said a clever thing, but he had a vein of brutal sarcasm which was not ineffective, and he always said exactly what he thought. He was indifferent to the susceptibilities of others, and when he wounded them was amused. He was constantly offending Dirk Stroeve so bitterly that he flung away, vowing he would never speak to him again; but there was a solid force in Strickland that attracted the fat Dutchman against his will, so that

he came back, fawning like a clumsy dog, though he knew that his only greeting would be the blow he dreaded.

I do not know why Strickland put up with me. Our relations were peculiar. One day he asked me to lend him fifty francs.

"I wouldn't dream of it," I replied.

"Why not?"

"It wouldn't amuse me."

"I'm frightfully hard up, you know."

"I don't care."

"You don't care if I starve?"

"Why on earth should I?" I asked in my turn.

He looked at me for a minute or two, pulling his untidy beard. I smiled at him.

"What are you amused at?" he said, with a gleam of anger in his eyes.

"You're so simple. You recognise no obligations. No one is under any obligation to you."

"Wouldn't it make you uncomfortable if I went and hanged myself because I'd been turned out of my room as I couldn't pay the rent?"

"Not a bit."

He chuckled.

"You're bragging. If I really did you'd be overwhelmed with remorse."

"Try it, and we'll see," I retorted.

A smile flickered in his eyes, and he stirred his absinthe in silence.

"Would you like to play chess?" I asked.

"I don't mind."

We set up the pieces, and when the board was ready he considered it with a comfortable eye. There is a sense of satisfaction in looking at your men all ready for the fray.

"Did you really think I'd lend you money?" I asked.

"I didn't see why you shouldn't."

"You surprise me."

"Why?"

"It's disappointing to find that at heart you are sentimental. I should have liked you better if you hadn't made that ingenuous appeal to my sympathies."

"I should have despised you if you'd been moved by it," he answered.

"That's better," I laughed.

We began to play. We were both absorbed in the game. When it was finished I said to him:

"Look here, if you're hard up, let me see your pictures. If there's anything I like I'll buy it."

"Go to hell," he answered.

He got up and was about to go away. I stopped him.

"You haven't paid for your absinthe," I said, smiling.

He cursed me, flung down the money, and left.

I did not see him for several days after that, but one evening, when I was sitting in the café, reading a paper, he came up and sat beside me.

"You haven't hanged yourself after all," I remarked.

"No. I've got a commission. I'm painting the portrait of a retired plumber for two hundred francs."*

"How did you manage that?"

"The woman where I get my bread recommended me. He'd told her he was looking out for someone to paint him. I've got to give her twenty francs."

"What's he like?"

"Splendid. He's got a great red face like a leg of mutton, and on his right cheek there's an enormous mole with long hairs growing out of it."

Strickland was in a good humour, and when Dirk Stroeve came up and sat down with us he attacked him with ferocious banter. He showed a skill I should never have credited him with in finding the places where the unhappy Dutchman was most sensitive. Strickland employed not the rapier of sarcasm but the bludgeon of invective. The attack was so unprovoked that Stroeve, taken unawares, was defenceless. He reminded you of a frightened sheep running aimlessly hither and thither. He was startled and amazed. At last the tears ran from his eyes. And the worst of it was that, though you hated Strickland, and the exhibition was horrible, it was impossible not to laugh. Dirk Stroeve was one of those unlucky persons whose most sincere emotions are ridiculous.

But after all when I look back upon that winter in Paris, my pleasantest recollection is of Dirk Stroeve. There was something very charming in his little household. He and his wife made a

* This picture, formerly in the possession of a wealthy manufacturer at Lille, who fled from that city on the approach of the Germans, is now in the National Gallery at Stockholm. The Swede is adept at the gentle pastime of fishing in troubled waters.

picture which the imagination gratefully dwelt upon, and the simplicity of his love for her had a deliberate grace. He remained absurd, but the sincerity of his passion excited one's sympathy. I could understand how his wife must feel for him, and I was glad that her affection was so tender. If she had any sense of humour, it must amuse her that he should place her on a pedestal and worship her with such an honest idolatry, but even while she laughed she must have been pleased and touched. He was the constant lover, and though she grew old, losing her rounded lines and her fair comeliness, to him she would certainly never alter. To him she would always be the loveliest woman in the world. There was a pleasing grace in the orderliness of their lives. They had but the studio, a bedroom, and a tiny kitchen. Mrs. Stroeve did all the housework herself; and while Dirk painted bad pictures, she went marketing, cooked the luncheon, sewed, occupied herself like a busy ant all the day; and in the evening sat in the studio, sewing again, while Dirk played music which I am sure was far beyond her comprehension. He played with taste, but with more feeling than was always justified, and into his music poured all his honest, sentimental, exuberant soul.

Their life in its own way was an idyl, and it managed to achieve a singular beauty. The absurdity that clung to everything connected with Dirk Stroeve gave it a curious note, like an unresolved discord, but made it somehow more modern, more human; like a rough joke thrown into a serious scene, it heightened the poignancy which all beauty has.

CHAPTER XXIV

SHORTLY before Christmas Dirk Stroeve came to ask me to spend the holiday with him. He had a characteristic sentimentality about the day and wanted to pass it among his friends with suitable ceremonies. Neither of us had seen Strickland for two or three weeks—I because I had been busy with friends who were spending a little while in Paris, and Stroeve because, having quarrelled with him more violently than usual, he had made up his mind to have nothing more to do with him. Strickland was impossible, and he swore never to speak to him again. But the season touched him with gentle feeling, and he hated the thought of Strickland spending Christmas Day by himself; he ascribed his own emotions

to him, and could not bear that on an occasion given up to good-fellowship the lonely painter should be abandoned to his own melancholy. Stroeve had set up a Christmas tree in his studio, and I suspected that we should both find absurd little presents hanging on its festive branches; but he was shy about seeing Strickland again; it was a little humiliating to forgive so easily insults so outrageous, and he wished me to be present at the reconciliation on which he was determined.

We walked together down the Avenue de Clichy, but Strickland was not in the café. It was too cold to sit outside, and we took our places on leather benches within. It was hot and stuffy, and the air was grey with smoke. Strickland did not come, but presently we saw the French painter who occasionally played chess with him. I had formed a casual acquaintance with him, and he sat down at our table. Stroeve asked him if he had seen Strickland.

"He's ill," he said. "Didn't you know?"

"Seriously?"

"Very, I understand."

Stroeve's face grew white.

"Why didn't he write and tell me? How stupid of me to quarrel with him! We must go to him at once. He can have no one to look after him. Where does he live?"

"I have no idea," said the Frenchman.

We discovered that none of us knew how to find him. Stroeve grew more and more distressed.

"He might die, and not a soul would know anything about it. It's dreadful. I can't bear the thought. We must find him at once."

I tried to make Stroeve understand that it was absurd to hunt vaguely about Paris. We must first think of some plan.

"Yes, but all this time he may be dying, and when we get there it may be too late to do anything."

"Sit still and let us think," I said impatiently.

The only address I knew was the Hôtel des Belges, but Strickland had long left that, and they would have no recollection of him. With that queer idea of his to keep his whereabouts secret, it was unlikely that, on leaving, he had said where he was going. Besides, it was more than five years ago. I felt pretty sure that he had not moved far. If he continued to frequent the same café as when he had stayed at the hotel, it was probably because it was the most convenient. Suddenly I remembered that he had got his

commission to paint a portrait through the baker from whom he bought his bread, and it struck me that there one might find his address. I called for a directory and looked out the bakers. There were five in the immediate neighbourhood, and the only thing was to go to all of them. Stroeve accompanied me unwillingly. His own plan was to run up and down the streets that led out of the Avenue de Clichy and ask at every house if Strickland lived there. My commonplace scheme was, after all, effective, for in the second shop we asked at the woman behind the counter acknowledged that she knew him. She was not certain where he lived, but it was in one of the three houses opposite. Luck favoured us, and in the first we tried the concierge told us that we should find him on the top floor.

"It appears that he's ill," said Stroeve.

"It may be," answered the concierge indifferently. "*En effet*, I have not seen him for several days."

Stroeve ran up the stairs ahead of me, and when I reached the top floor I found him talking to a workman in his shirt-sleeves who had opened a door at which Stroeve had knocked. He pointed to another door. He believed that the person who lived there was a painter. He had not seen him for a week. Stroeve made as though he were about to knock, and then turned to me with a gesture of helplessness. I saw that he was panic-stricken.

"Supposing he's dead?"

"Not he," I said.

I knocked. There was no answer. I tried the handle, and found the door unlocked. I walked in, and Stroeve followed me. The room was in darkness. I could only see that it was an attic, with a sloping roof; and a faint glimmer, no more than a less profound obscurity, came from a skylight.

"Strickland," I called.

There was no answer. It was really rather mysterious, and it seemed to me that Stroeve, standing just behind, was trembling in his shoes. For a moment I hesitated to strike a light. I dimly perceived a bed in the corner, and I wondered whether the light would disclose lying on it a dead body.

"Haven't you got a match, you fool?"

Strickland's voice, coming out of the darkness, harshly, made me start.

Stroeve cried out:

"Oh, my God, I thought you were dead."

I struck a match, and looked about for a candle. I had a rapid glimpse of a tiny apartment, half room, half studio, in which was nothing but a bed, canvases with their faces to the wall, an easel, a table, and a chair. There was no carpet on the floor. There was no fireplace. On the table, crowded with paints, palette-knives, and litter of all kinds, was the end of a candle. I lit it. Strickland was lying in the bed, uncomfortably because it was too small for him, and he had put all his clothes over him for warmth. It was obvious at a glance that he was in a high fever. Stroeve, his voice cracking with emotion, went up to him.

"Oh, my poor friend, what is the matter with you? I had no idea you were ill. Why didn't you let me know? You must know I'd have done anything in the world for you. Were you thinking of what I said? I didn't mean it. I was wrong. It was stupid of me to take offence."

"Go to hell," said Strickland.

"Now, be reasonable. Let me make you comfortable. Haven't you anyone to look after you?"

He looked round the squalid attic in dismay. He tried to arrange the bed-clothes. Strickland, breathing laboriously, kept an angry silence. He gave me a resentful glance. I stood quite quietly, looking at him.

"If you want to do something for me, you can get me some milk," he said at last. "I haven't been able to get out for two days."

There was an empty bottle by the side of the bed, which had contained milk, and in a piece of newspaper a few crumbs.

"What have you been having?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"For how long?" cried Stroeve. "Do you mean to say you've had nothing to eat or drink for two days? It's horrible."

"I've had water."

His eyes dwelt for a moment on a large can within reach of an outstretched arm.

"I'll go immediately," said Stroeve. "Is there anything you fancy?"

I suggested that he should get a thermometer, and a few grapes, and some bread. Stroeve, glad to make himself useful, clattered down the stairs.

"Damned fool," muttered Strickland.

I felt his pulse. It was beating quickly and feebly. I asked him

one or two questions, but he would not answer, and when I pressed him he turned his face irritably to the wall. The only thing was to wait in silence. In ten minutes Stroeve, panting, came back. Besides what I had suggested, he brought candles, and meat-juice, and a spirit-lamp. He was a practical little fellow, and without delay set about making bread-and-milk. I took Strickland's temperature. It was a hundred and four. He was obviously very ill.

CHAPTER XXV

PRESENTLY we left him. Dirk was going home to dinner, and I proposed to find a doctor and bring him to see Strickland; but when we got down into the street, fresh after the stuffy attic, the Dutchman begged me to go immediately to his studio. He had something in mind which he would not tell me, but he insisted that it was very necessary for me to accompany him. Since I did not think a doctor could at the moment do any more than we had done, I consented. We found Blanche Stroeve laying the table for dinner. Dirk went up to her, and took both her hands.

"Dear one, I want you to do something for me," he said.

She looked at him with the grave cheerfulness which was one of her charms. His red face was shining with sweat, and he had a look of comic agitation, but there was in his round, surprised eyes an eager light.

"Strickland is very ill. He may be dying. He is alone in a filthy attic, and there is not a soul to look after him. I want you to let me bring him here."

She withdrew her hands quickly, I had never seen her make so rapid a movement, and her cheeks flushed.

"Oh no."

"Oh, my dear one, don't refuse. I couldn't bear to leave him where he is. I shouldn't sleep a wink for thinking of him."

"I have no objection to your nursing him."

Her voice was cold and distant.

"But he'll die."

"Let him."

Stroeve gave a little gasp. He wiped his face. He turned to me for support, but I did not know what to say.

"He's a great artist."

"What do I care? I hate him."

"Oh, my love, my precious, you don't mean that. I beseech you to let me bring him here. We can make him comfortable. Perhaps we can save him. He shall be no trouble to you. I will do everything. We'll make him up a bed in the studio. We can't let him die like a dog. It would be inhuman."

"Why can't he go to a hospital?"

"A hospital! He needs the care of loving hands. He must be treated with infinite tact."

I was surprised to see how moved she was. She went on laying the table, but her hands trembled.

"I have no patience with you. Do you think if you were ill he would stir a finger to help you?"

"But what does that matter? I should have you to nurse me. It wouldn't be necessary. And besides, I'm different; I'm not of any importance."

"You have no more spirit than a mongrel cur. You lie down on the ground and ask people to trample on you."

Stroeve gave a little laugh. He thought he understood the reason of his wife's attitude.

"Oh, my poor dear, you're thinking of that day he came here to look at my pictures. What does it matter if he didn't think them any good? It was stupid of me to show them to him. I dare say they're not very good."

He looked round the studio ruefully. On the easel was a half-finished picture of a smiling Italian peasant, holding a bunch of grapes over the head of a dark-eyed girl.

"Even if he didn't like them he should have been civil. He needn't have insulted you. He showed that he despised you, and you lick his hand. Oh, I hate him."

"Dear child, he has genius. You don't think I believe that I have it. I wish I had; but I know it when I see it, and I honour it with all my heart. It's the most wonderful thing in the world. It's a great burden to its possessors. We should be very tolerant with them, and very patient."

I stood apart, somewhat embarrassed by the domestic scene, and wondered why Stroeve had insisted on my coming with him. I saw that his wife was on the verge of tears.

"But it's not only because he's a genius that I ask you to let me bring him here; it's because he's a human being, and he is ill and poor."

"I will never have him in my house—never."

Stroevé turned to me.

"Tell her that it's a matter of life and death. It's impossible to leave him in that wretched hole."

"It's quite obvious that it would be much easier to nurse him here," I said, "but of course it would be very inconvenient. I have an idea that someone will have to be with him day and night."

"My love, it's not you who would shirk a little trouble."

"If he comes here, I shall go," said Mrs. Stroevé violently.

"I don't recognise you. You're so good and kind."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, let me be. You drive me to distraction."

Then at last the tears came. She sank into a chair, and buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook convulsively. In a moment Dirk was on his knees beside her, with his arms round her, kissing her, calling her all sorts of pet names, and the facile tears ran down his own cheeks. Presently she released herself and dried her tears.

"Leave me alone," she said, not unkindly; and then to me, trying to smile: "What must you think of me?"

Stroevé, looking at her with perplexity, hesitated. His forehead was all puckered and his red mouth set in a pout. He reminded me oddly of an agitated guinea-pig.

"Then it's No, darling?" he said at last.

She gave a gesture of lassitude. She was exhausted.

"The studio is yours. Everything belongs to you. If you want to bring him here, how can I prevent you?"

A sudden smile flashed across his round face.

"Then you consent? I knew you would. Oh, my precious."

Suddenly she pulled herself together. She looked at him with haggard eyes. She clasped her hands over her heart as though its beating were intolerable.

"Oh, Dirk, I've never since we met asked you to do anything for me."

"You know there's nothing in the world that I wouldn't do for you."

"I beg you not to let Strickland come here. Anyone else you like. Bring a thief, a drunkard, any outcast off the streets, and I promise you I'll do everything I can for them gladly. But I beseech you not to bring Strickland here."

"But why?"

"I'm frightened of him. I don't know why, but there's something in him that terrifies me. He'll do us some great harm. I know it. I feel it. If you bring him here it can only end badly."

"But how unreasonable!"

"No, no. I know I'm right. Something terrible will happen to us."

"Because we do a good action?"

She was panting now, and in her face was a terror which was inexplicable. I do not know what she thought. I felt that she was possessed by some shapeless dread which robbed her of all self-control. As a rule she was so calm; her agitation now was amazing. Stroeve looked at her for a while with puzzled consternation.

"You are my wife; you are dearer to me than anyone in the world. No one shall come here without your entire consent."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and I thought she was going to faint. I was a little impatient with her; I had not suspected that she was so neurotic a woman. Then I heard Stroeve's voice again. It seemed to break oddly on the silence.

"Haven't you been in bitter distress once when a helping hand was held out to you? You know how much it means. Wouldn't you like to do someone a good turn when you have the chance?"

The words were ordinary enough, and to my mind there was in them something so hortatory that I almost smiled. I was astonished at the effect they had on Blanche Stroeve. She started a little, and gave her husband a long look. His eyes were fixed on the ground. I did not know why he seemed embarrassed. A faint colour came into her cheeks, and then her face became white—more than white, ghastly; you felt that the blood had shrunk away from the whole surface of her body; and even her hands were pale. A shiver passed through her. The silence of the studio seemed to gather body, so that it became an almost palpable presence. I was bewildered.

"Bring Strickland here, Dirk. I'll do my best for him."

"My precious," he smiled.

He wanted to take her in his arms, but she avoided him.

"Don't be affectionate before strangers, Dirk," she said. "It makes me feel such a fool."

Her manner was quite normal again, and no one could have told that so shortly before she had been shaken by such a great emotion.

CHAPTER XXVI

NEXT day we moved Strickland. It needed a good deal of firmness and still more patience to induce him to come, but he was really too ill to offer any effective resistance to Stroeve's entreaties and to my determination. We dressed him, while he feebly cursed us, got him downstairs, into a cab, and eventually to Stroeve's studio. He was so exhausted by the time we arrived that he allowed us to put him to bed without a word. He was ill for six weeks. At one time it looked as though he could not live more than a few hours, and I am convinced that it was only through the Dutchman's doggedness that he pulled through. I have never known a more difficult patient. It was not that he was exacting and querulous; on the contrary, he never complained, he asked for nothing, he was perfectly silent; but he seemed to resent the care that was taken of him; he received all enquiries about his feelings or his needs with a gibe, a sneer, or an oath. I found him detestable, and as soon as he was out of danger I had no hesitation in telling him so.

"Go to hell," he answered briefly.

Dirk Stroeve, giving up his work entirely, nursed Strickland with tenderness and sympathy. He was dexterous to make him comfortable, and he exercised a cunning of which I should never have thought him capable to induce him to take the medicines prescribed by the doctor. Nothing was too much trouble for him. Though his means were adequate to the needs of himself and his wife, he certainly had no money to waste; but now he was wantonly extravagant in the purchase of delicacies, out of season and dear, which might tempt Strickland's capricious appetite. I shall never forget the tactful patience with which he persuaded him to take nourishment. He was never put out by Strickland's rudeness; if it was merely sullen, he appeared not to notice it; if it was aggressive, he only chuckled. When Strickland, recovering somewhat, was in a good humour and amused himself by laughing at him, he deliberately did absurd things to excite his ridicule. Then he would give me little happy glances, so that I might notice in how much better form the patient was. Stroeve was sublime.

But it was Blanche who most surprised me. She proved herself not only a capable but a devoted nurse. There was nothing in her to remind you that she had so vehemently struggled against her husband's wish to bring Strickland to the studio. She insisted on

doing her share of the offices needful to the sick. She arranged his bed so that it was possible to change the sheet without disturbing him. She washed him. When I remarked on her competence, she told me with that pleasant little smile of hers that for a while she had worked in a hospital. She gave no sign that she hated Strickland so desperately. She did not speak to him much, but she was quick to forestall his wants. For a fortnight it was necessary that someone should stay with him all night, and she took turns at watching with her husband. I wondered what she thought during the long darkness as she sat by the bedside. Strickland was a weird figure as he lay there, thinner than ever, with his ragged red beard and his eyes staring feverishly into vacancy; his illness seemed to have made them larger, and they had an unnatural brightness.

"Does he ever talk to you in the night?" I asked her once.

"Never."

"Do you dislike him as much as you did?"

"More, if anything."

She looked at me with her calm grey eyes. Her expression was so placid, it was hard to believe that she was capable of the violent emotion I had witnessed.

"Has he ever thanked you for what you do for him?"

"No," she smiled.

"He's inhuman."

"He's abominable."

Stroeve was, of course, delighted with her. He could not do enough to show his gratitude for the whole-hearted devotion with which she had accepted the burden he laid on her. But he was a little puzzled by the behaviour of Blanche and Strickland toward one another.

"Do you know, I've seen them sit there for hours together without saying a word?"

On one occasion, when Strickland was so much better that in a day or two he was to get up, I sat with them in the studio. Dirk and I were talking. Mrs. Stroeve sewed, and I thought I recognised the shirt she was mending as Strickland's. He lay on his back; he did not speak. Once I saw that his eyes were fixed on Blanche Stroeve, and there was in them a curious irony. Feeling their gaze, she raised her own, and for a moment they stared at one another. I could not quite understand her expression. Her eyes had in them a strange perplexity, and perhaps—but why?—alarm.

In a moment Strickland looked away and idly surveyed the ceiling, but she continued to stare at him, and now her look was quite inexplicable.

In a few days Strickland began to get up. He was nothing but skin and bone. His clothes hung upon him like rags on a scarecrow. With his untidy beard and long hair, his features, always a little larger than life, now emphasised by illness, he had an extraordinary aspect; but it was so odd that it was not quite ugly. There was something monumental in his ugliness. I do not know how to express precisely the impression he made upon me. It was not exactly spirituality that was obvious, though the screen of the flesh seemed almost transparent, because there was in his face an outrageous sensuality; but, though it sounds nonsense, it seemed as though his sensuality were curiously spiritual. There was in him something primitive. He seemed to partake of those obscure forces of nature which the Greeks personified in shapes part human and part beast, the satyr and the faun. I thought of Marsyas, whom the god flayed because he had dared to rival him in song. Strickland seemed to bear in his heart strange harmonies and unadventured patterns, and I foresaw for him an end of torture and despair. I had again the feeling that he was possessed of a devil; but you could not say that it was a devil of evil, for it was a primitive force that existed before good and ill.

He was still too weak to paint, and he sat in the studio, silent, occupied with God knows what dreams, or reading. The books he liked were queer; sometimes I would find him poring over the poems of Mallarmé, and he read them as a child reads, forming the words with his lips, and I wondered what strange emotion he got from those subtle cadences and obscure phrases; and again I found him absorbed in the detective novels of Gaboriau. I amused myself by thinking that in his choice of books he showed pleasantly the irreconcilable sides of his fantastic nature. It was singular to notice that even in the weak state of his body he had no thought for its comfort. Stroeve liked his ease, and in his studio were a couple of heavily upholstered arm-chairs and a large divan. Strickland would not go near them, not from any affectation of stoicism, for I found him seated on a three-legged stool when I went into the studio one day and he was alone, but because he did not like them. For choice he sat on a kitchen chair without arms. It often exasperated me to see him. I never knew a man so entirely indifferent to his surroundings.

CHAPTER XXVII

Two or three weeks passed. One morning, having come to a pause in my work, I thought I would give myself a holiday, and I went to the Louvre. I wandered about, looking at the pictures I knew so well, and let my fancy play idly with the emotions they suggested. I sauntered into the long gallery, and there suddenly saw Stroeve. I smiled, for his appearance, so rotund and yet so startled, could never fail to excite a smile, and then as I came nearer I noticed that he seemed singularly disconsolate. He looked woebegone and yet ridiculous, like a man who has fallen into the water with all his clothes on, and, being rescued from death, frightened still, feels that he only looks a fool. Turning round, he stared at me, but I perceived that he did not see me. His round blue eyes looked harassed behind his glasses.

"Stroeve," I said.

He gave a little start, and then smiled, but his smile was rueful.

"Why are you idling in this disgraceful fashion?" I asked gaily.

"It's a long time since I was at the Louvre. I thought I'd come and see if they had anything new."

"But you told me you had to get a picture finished this week."

"Strickland's painting in my studio."

"Well?"

"I suggested it myself. He's not strong enough to go back to his own place yet. I thought we could both paint there. Lots of fellows in the Quarter share a studio. I thought it would be fun. I've always thought it would be jolly to have someone to talk to when one was tired of work."

He said all this slowly, detaching statement from statement with a little awkward silence, and he kept his kind, foolish eyes fixed on mine. They were full of tears.

"I don't think I understand," I said.

"Strickland can't work with anyone else in the studio."

"Damn it all, it's your studio. That's his look-out."

He looked at me pitifully. His lips were trembling.

"What happened?" I asked, rather sharply.

He hesitated and flushed. He glanced unhappily at one of the pictures on the wall.

"He wouldn't let me go on painting. He told me to get out."

"But why didn't you tell him to go to hell?"

"He turned me out. I couldn't very well struggle with him. He threw my hat after me, and locked the door."

I was furious with Strickland, and was indignant with myself, because Dirk Stroeve cut such an absurd figure that I felt inclined to laugh.

"But what did your wife say?"

"She'd gone out to do the marketing."

"Is he going to let her in?"

"I don't know."

I gazed at Stroeve with perplexity. He stood like a schoolboy with whom a master is finding fault.

"Shall I get rid of Strickland for you?" I asked.

He gave a little start, and his shining face grew very red.

"No. You'd better not do anything."

He nodded to me and walked away. It was clear that for some reason he did not want to discuss the matter. I did not understand.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE explanation came a week later. It was about ten o'clock at night; I had been dining by myself at a restaurant and, having returned to my small apartment, was sitting in my parlour, reading. I heard the cracked tinkling of the bell, and, going into the corridor, opened the door. Stroeve stood before me.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

In the dimness of the landing I could not see him very well, but there was something in his voice that surprised me. I knew he was of abstemious habit or I should have thought he had been drinking. I led the way into my sitting-room and asked him to sit down.

"Thank God I've found you," he said.

"What's the matter?" I asked in astonishment at his vehemence.

I was able now to see him well. As a rule he was neat in his person, but now his clothes were in disorder. He looked suddenly bedraggled. I was convinced he had been drinking, and I smiled. I was on the point of chaffing him on his state.

"I didn't know where to go," he burst out. "I came here earlier, but you weren't in."

"I dined late," I said.

I changed my mind: it was not liquor that had driven him to this obvious desperation. His face, usually so rosy, was now strangely mottled. His hands trembled.

"Has anything happened?" I asked.

"My wife has left me."

He could hardly get the words out. He gave a little gasp, and the tears began to trickle down his round cheeks. I did not know what to say. My first thought was that she had come to the end of her forbearance with his infatuation for Strickland, and, goaded by the latter's cynical behaviour, had insisted that he should be turned out. I knew her capable of temper, for all the calmness of her manner; and if Stroeve still refused, she might easily have flung out of the studio with vows never to return. But the little man was so distressed that I could not smile.

"My dear fellow, don't be unhappy. She'll come back. You mustn't take very seriously what women say when they're in a passion.

"You don't understand. She's in love with Strickland."

"What!" I was startled at this, but the idea had no sooner taken possession of me than I saw it was absurd.

"How can you be so silly? You don't mean to say you're jealous of Strickland?" I almost laughed. "You know very well that she can't bear the sight of him."

"You don't understand," he moaned.

"You're an hysterical ass," I said a little impatiently. "Let me give you a whisky-and-soda, and you'll feel better."

I supposed that for some reason or other—and Heaven knows what ingenuity men exercise to torment themselves—Dirk had got it into his head that his wife cared for Strickland, and with his genius for blundering he might quite well have offended her so that, to anger him, perhaps, she had taken pains to foster his suspicion.

"Look here," I said, "let's go back to your studio. If you've made a fool of yourself you must eat humble pie. Your wife doesn't strike me as the sort of woman to bear malice."

"How can I go back to the studio?" he said wearily. "They're there. I've left it to them."

"Then it's not your wife who's left you; it's you who've left your wife."

"For God's sake don't talk to me like that."

Still I could not take him seriously. I did not for a moment believe what he had told me. But he was in very real distress.

"Well, you've come here to talk to me about it. You'd better tell me the whole story."

"This afternoon I couldn't stand it any more. I went to Strickland and told him I thought he was quite well enough to go back to his own place. I wanted the studio myself."

"No one but Strickland would have needed telling," I said. "What did he say?"

"He laughed a little; you know how he laughs, not as though he were amused, but as though you were a damned fool, and said he'd go at once. He began to put his things together. You remember I fetched from his room what I thought he needed, and he asked Blanche for a piece of paper and some string to make a parcel."

Stroeve stopped, gasping, and I thought he was going to faint. This was not at all the story I had expected him to tell me.

"She was very pale, but she brought the paper and the string. He didn't say anything. He made the parcel and he whistled a tune. He took no notice of either of us. His eyes had an ironic smile in them. My heart was like lead. I was afraid something was going to happen, and I wished I hadn't spoken. He looked round for his hat. Then she spoke:

"'I'm going with Strickland, Dirk,' she said. 'I can't live with you any more.'"

"I tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come. Strickland didn't say anything. He went on whistling as though it had nothing to do with him."

Stroeve stopped again and mopped his face. I kept quite still. I believed him now, and I was astounded. But all the same I could not understand.

Then he told me, in a trembling voice, with the tears pouring down his cheeks, how he had gone up to her, trying to take her in his arms, but she had drawn away and begged him not to touch her. He implored her not to leave him. He told her how passionately he loved her, and reminded her of all the devotion he had lavished upon her. He spoke to her of the happiness of their life. He was not angry with her. He did not reproach her.

"Please let me go quietly, Dirk," she said at last. "Don't you understand that I love Strickland? Where he goes I shall go."

"But you must know that he'll never make you happy. For

your own sake don't go. You don't know what you've got to look forward to."

"It's your fault. You insisted on his coming here."

He turned to Strickland.

"Have mercy on her," he implored him. "You can't let her do anything so mad."

"She can do as she chooses," said Strickland. "She's not forced to come."

"My choice is made," she said, in a dull voice.

Strickland's injurious calm robbed Stroeve of the rest of his self-control. Blind rage seized him, and without knowing what he was doing he flung himself on Strickland. Strickland was taken by surprise and he staggered, but he was very strong, even after his illness, and in a moment, he did not exactly know how, Stroeve found himself on the floor.

"You funny little man," said Strickland.

Stroeve picked himself up. He noticed that his wife had remained perfectly still, and to be made ridiculous before her increased his humiliation. His spectacles had tumbled off in the struggle, and he could not immediately see them. She picked them up and silently handed them to him. He seemed suddenly to realise his unhappiness, and though he knew he was making himself still more absurd, he began to cry. He hid his face in his hands. The others watched him without a word. They did not move from where they stood.

"Oh, my dear," he groaned at last, "how can you be so cruel?"

"I can't help myself, Dirk," she answered.

"I've worshipped you as no woman was ever worshipped before. If in anything I did I displeased you, why didn't you tell me, and I'd have changed. I've done everything I could for you."

She did not answer. Her face was set, and he saw that he was only boring her. She put on a coat and her hat. She moved towards the door, and he saw that in a moment she would be gone. He went up to her quickly and fell on his knees before her, seizing her hands: he abandoned all self-respect.

"Oh, don't go, my darling. I can't live without you; I shall kill myself. If I've done anything to offend you I beg you to forgive me. Give me another chance. I'll try harder still to make you happy."

"Get up, Dirk. You're making yourself a perfect fool."

He staggered to his feet, but still he would not let her go.

"Where are you going?" he said hastily. "You don't know what Strickland's place is like. You can't live there. It would be awful."

"If I don't care, I don't see why you should."

"Stay a minute longer. I must speak. After all, you can't grudge me that."

"What is the good? I've made up my mind. Nothing that you can say will make me alter it."

He gulped, and put his hand to his heart to ease its painful beating.

"I'm not going to ask you to change your mind, but I want you to listen to me for a minute. It's the last thing I shall ever ask you. Don't refuse me that."

She paused, looking at him with those reflective eyes of hers, which now were so indifferent to him. She came back into the studio and leaned against the table.

"Well?"

Stroeve made a great effort to collect himself.

"You must be a little reasonable. You can't live on air, you know. Strickland hasn't got a penny."

"I know."

"You'll suffer the most awful privations. You know why he took so long to get well. He was half starved."

"I can earn money for him."

"How?"

"I don't know. I shall find a way."

A horrible thought passed through the Dutchman's mind, and he shuddered.

"I think you must be mad. I don't know what has come over you."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Now may I go?"

"Wait one second longer."

He looked round his studio wearily; he had loved it because her presence had made it gay and home-like; he shut his eyes for an instant; then he gave her a long look as though to impress on his mind the picture of her. He got up and took his hat.

"No; I'll go."

"You?"

She was startled. She did not know what he meant.

"I can't bear to think of you living in that horrible, filthy attic. After all, this is your home just as much as mine. You'll

be comfortable here. You'll be spared at least the worst privations."

He went to the drawer in which he kept his money and took out several bank-notes.

"I would like to give you half what I've got here."

He put them on the table. Neither Strickland nor his wife spoke.

Then he recollected something else.

"Will you pack up my clothes and leave them with the concierge? I'll come and fetch them to-morrow." He tried to smile. "Good-bye, my dear. I'm grateful for all the happiness you gave me in the past."

He walked out and closed the door behind him. With my mind's eye I saw Strickland throw his hat on a table, and, sitting down, begin to smoke a cigarette.

CHAPTER XXIX

I KEPT silence for a little while, thinking of what Stroeve had told me. I could not stomach his weakness, and he saw my disapproval.

"You know as well as I do how Strickland lived," he said tremulously. "I couldn't let her live in those circumstances—I simply couldn't."

"That's your business," I answered.

"What would you have done?" he asked.

"She went with her eyes open. If she had to put up with certain inconveniences it was her own look-out."

"Yes; but, you see, you don't love her."

"Do you love her still?"

"Oh, more than ever. Strickland isn't the man to make a woman happy. It can't last. I want her to know that I shall never fail her."

"Does that mean that you're prepared to take her back?"

"I shouldn't hesitate. Why, she'll want me more than ever then. When she's alone and humiliated and broken it would be dreadful if she had nowhere to go."

He seemed to bear no resentment. I suppose it was commonplace in me that I felt slightly outraged at his lack of spirit. Perhaps he guessed what was in my mind, for he said:

"I couldn't expect her to love me as I loved her. I'm a buffoon.

I'm not the sort of man that women love. I've always known that. I can't blame her if she's fallen in love with Strickland."

"You certainly have less vanity than any man I've ever known," I said.

"I love her so much better than myself. It seems to me that when vanity comes into love it can only be because really you love yourself best. After all, it constantly happens that a man when he's married falls in love with somebody else; when he gets over it he returns to his wife, and she takes him back, and everyone thinks it very natural. Why should it be different with women?"

"I dare say that's logical," I smiled, "but most men are made differently, and they can't."

But while I talked to Stroeve I was puzzling over the suddenness of the whole affair. I could not imagine that he had had no warning. I remembered the curious look I had seen in Blanche Stroeve's eyes; perhaps its explanation was that she was growing dimly conscious of a feeling in her heart that surprised and alarmed her.

"Did you have no suspicion before to-day that there was anything between them?" I asked.

He did not answer for a while. There was a pencil on the table, and unconsciously he drew a head on the blotting-paper.

"Please say so, if you hate my asking you questions," I said.

"It eases me to talk. Oh, if you knew the frightful anguish in my heart." He threw the pencil down. "Yes, I've known it for a fortnight. I knew it before she did."

"Why on earth didn't you send Strickland packing?"

"I couldn't believe it. It seemed so improbable. She couldn't bear the sight of him. It was more than improbable; it was incredible. I thought it was merely jealousy. You see, I've always been jealous, but I trained myself never to show it; I was jealous of every man she knew; I was jealous of you. I knew she didn't love me as I loved her. That was only natural, wasn't it? But she allowed me to love her, and that was enough to make me happy. I forced myself to go out for hours together in order to leave them by themselves; I wanted to punish myself for suspicions which were unworthy of me; and when I came back I found they didn't want me—not Strickland, he didn't care if I was there or not, but Blanche. She shuddered when I went to kiss her. When at last I was certain, I didn't know what to do; I knew they'd only laugh at

me if I made a scene. I thought if I held my tongue and pretended not to see, everything would come right. I made up my mind to get him away quietly, without quarrelling. Oh, if you only knew what I've suffered."

Then he told me again of his asking Strickland to go. He chose his moment carefully, and tried to make his request sound casual; but he could not master the trembling of his voice, and he felt himself that into words that he wished to seem jovial and friendly there crept the bitterness of his jealousy. He had not expected Strickland to take him up on the spot and make his preparations to go there and then; above all, he had not expected his wife's decision to go with him. I saw that now he wished with all his heart that he had held his tongue. He preferred the anguish of jealousy to the anguish of separation.

"I wanted to kill him, and I only made a fool of myself."

He was silent for a long time, and then he said what I knew was in his mind.

"If I'd only waited, perhaps it would have gone all right. I shouldn't have been so impatient. Oh, poor child, what have I driven her to?"

I shrugged my shoulders, but did not speak. I had no sympathy for Blanche Stroeve, but knew that it would only pain poor Dirk if I told him exactly what I thought of her.

He had reached the stage of exhaustion when he could not stop talking. He went over again every word of the scene. Now something occurred to him that he had not told me before; now he discussed what he ought to have said instead of what he did say; then he lamented his blindness. He regretted that he had done this, and blamed himself that he had omitted the other. It grew later and later, and at last I was as tired as he.

"What are you going to do now?" I said finally.

"What can I do? I shall wait till she sends for me."

"Why don't you go away for a bit?"

"No, no; I must be at hand when she wants me."

For the present he seemed quite lost. He had made no plans. When I suggested that he should go to bed he said he could not sleep; he wanted to go out and walk the streets till day. He was evidently in no state to be left alone. I persuaded him to stay the night with me, and I put him into my own bed. I had a divan in my sitting-room, and could very well sleep on that. He was by now so worn out that he could not resist my

firmness. I gave him a sufficient dose of veronal to insure his unconsciousness for several hours. I thought that was the best service I could render him. *

CHAPTER XXX

BUT the bed I made up for myself was sufficiently uncomfortable to give me a wakeful night, and I thought a good deal of what the unlucky Dutchman had told me. I was not so much puzzled by Blanche Stroeve's action, for I saw in that merely the result of a physical appeal. I do not suppose she had ever really cared for her husband, and what I had taken for love was no more than the feminine response to caresses and comfort which in the minds of most women passes for it. It is a passive feeling capable of being roused for any object, as the vine can grow on any tree; and the wisdom of the world recognises its strength when it urges a girl to marry the man who wants her with the assurance that love will follow. It is an emotion made up of the satisfaction in security, pride of property, the pleasure of being desired, the gratification of a household, and it is only by an amiable vanity that women ascribe to it spiritual value. It is an emotion which is defenceless against passion. I suspected that Blanche Stroeve's violent dislike of Strickland had in it from the beginning a vague element of sexual attraction. Who am I that I should seek to unravel the mysterious intricacies of sex? Perhaps Stroeve's passion excited without satisfying that part of her nature, and she hated Strickland because she felt in him the power to give her what she needed. I think she was quite sincere when she struggled against her husband's desire to bring him into the studio; I think she was frightened of him, though she knew not why; and I remembered how she had foreseen disaster. I think in some curious way the horror which she felt for him was a transference of the horror which she felt for herself because he so strangely troubled her. His appearance was wild and uncouth; there was aloofness in his eyes and sensuality in his mouth; he was big and strong; he gave the impression of untamed passion; and perhaps she felt in him, too, that sinister element which had made me think of those wild beings of the world's early history when matter, retaining its early connection with the earth, seemed to possess yet a spirit of its own.

If he affected her at all, it was inevitable that she should love or hate him. She hated him.

And then I fancy that the daily intimacy with the sick man moved her strangely. She raised his head to give him food, and it was heavy against her hand; when she had fed him she wiped his sensual mouth and his red beard. She washed his limbs; they were covered with thick hair; and when she dried his hands, even in his weakness they were strong and sinewy. His fingers were long; they were the capable, fashioning fingers of the artist; and I know not what troubling thoughts they excited in her. He slept very quietly, without a movement, so that he might have been dead, and he was like some wild creature of the woods, resting after a long chase; and she wondered what fancies passed through his dreams. Did he dream of the nymph flying through the woods of Greece with the satyr in hot pursuit? She fled, swift of foot and desperate, but he gained on her step by step, till she felt his hot breath on her cheek; and still she fled silently, and silently he pursued, and when at last he seized her was it terror that thrilled her heart or was it ecstasy?

Blanche Stroeve was in the cruel grip of appetite. Perhaps she hated Strickland still, but she hungered for him, and everything that had made up her life till then became of no account. She ceased to be a woman, complex, kind and petulant, considerate and thoughtless; she was a Mænad. She was desire.

But perhaps this is very fanciful; and it may be that she was merely bored with her husband and went to Strickland out of a callous curiosity. She may have had no particular feeling for him, but succumbed to his wish from propinquity or idleness, to find then that she was powerless in a snare of her own contriving. How did I know what were the thoughts and emotions behind that placid brow and those cool grey eyes?

But if one could be certain of nothing in dealing with creatures so incalculable as human beings, there were explanations of Blanche Stroeve's behaviour which were at all events plausible. On the other hand, I did not understand Strickland at all. I racked my brain, but could in no way account for an action so contrary to my conception of him. It was not strange that he should so heartlessly have betrayed his friends' confidence, nor that he hesitated not at all to gratify a whim at the cost of another's misery. That was in his character. He was a man without any conception of gratitude. He had no compassion. The emotions common to most of us simply did not exist in him, and it was as

absurd to blame him for not feeling them as for blaming the tiger because he is fierce and cruel. But it was the whim I could not understand.

I could not believe that Strickland had fallen in love with Blanche Stroeve. I did not believe him capable of love. That is an emotion in which tenderness is an essential part, but Strickland had no tenderness either for himself or for others; there is in love a sense of weakness, a desire to protect, an eagerness to do good and to give pleasure—if not unselfishness, at all events a selfishness which marvellously conceals itself; it has in it a certain diffidence. These were not traits which I could imagine in Strickland. Love is absorbing; it takes the lover out of himself; the most clear-sighted, though he may know, cannot realise that his love will cease; it gives body to what he knows is illusion, and, knowing it is nothing else, he loves it better than reality. It makes a man a little more than himself, and at the same time a little less. He ceases to be himself. He is no longer an individual, but a thing, an instrument to some purpose foreign to his ego. Love is never quite devoid of sentimentality, and Strickland was the least inclined to that infirmity of any man I have known. I could not believe that he would ever suffer that possession of himself which love is; he could never endure a foreign yoke. I believed him capable of uprooting from his heart, though it might be with agony, so that he was left battered and ensanguined, anything that came between himself and that uncomprehended craving that urged him constantly to he knew not what. If I have succeeded at all in giving the complicated impression that Strickland made on me, it will not seem outrageous to say that I felt he was at once too great and too small for love.

But I suppose that everyone's conception of the passion is formed on his own idiosyncrasies, and it is different with every different person. A man like Strickland would love in a manner peculiar to himself. It was vain to seek the analysis of his emotion.

CHAPTER XXXI

NEXT day, though I pressed him to remain, Stroeve left me. I offered to fetch his things from the studio, but he insisted on going himself; I think he hoped they had not thought of getting them

together, so that he would have an opportunity of seeing his wife again and perhaps inducing her to come back to him. But he found his traps awaiting for him in the porter's lodge, and the concierge told him that Blanche had gone out. I do not think he resisted the temptation of giving her an account of his troubles. I found that he was telling them to everyone he knew; he expected sympathy, but only excited ridicule.

He bore himself most unbecomingly. Knowing at what time his wife did her shopping, one day, unable any longer to bear not seeing her, he waylaid her in the street. She would not speak to him, but he insisted on speaking to her. He spluttered out words of apology for any wrong he had committed toward her; he told her he loved her devotedly and begged her to return to him. She would not answer; she walked hurriedly, with averted face. I imagined him with his fat little legs trying to keep up with her. Panting a little in his haste, he told her how miserable he was; he besought her to have mercy on him; he promised, if she would forgive him, to do everything she wanted. He offered to take her for a journey. He told her that Strickland would soon tire of her. When he repeated to me the whole sordid little scene I was outraged. He had shown neither sense nor dignity. He had omitted nothing that could make his wife despise him. There is no cruelty greater than a woman's to a man who loves her and whom she does not love; she has no kindness then, no tolerance even, she has only an insane irritation. Blanche Stroeve stopped suddenly, and as hard as she could slapped her husband's face. She took advantage of his confusion to escape, and ran up the stairs to the studio. No word had passed her lips.

When he told me this he put his hand to his cheek as though he still felt the smart of the blow, and in his eyes was a pain that was heartrending and an amazement that was ludicrous. He looked like an overblown schoolboy, and though I felt so sorry for him, I could hardly help laughing.

Then he took to walking along the street which she must pass through to get to the shops, and he would stand at the corner, on the other side, as she went along. He dared not speak to her again, but sought to put into his round eyes the appeal that was in his heart. I suppose he had some idea that the sight of his misery would touch her. She never made the smallest sign that she saw him. She never even changed the hour of her errands or sought an alternative route. I have an idea that there was some cruelty in her

indifference.' Perhaps she got enjoyment out of the torture she inflicted. I wondered why she hated him so much.

I begged Stroeve to behave more wisely. His want of spirit was exasperating.

"You're doing no good at all by going on like this," I said. "I think you'd have been wiser if you'd hit her over the head with a stick. She wouldn't have despised you as she does now."

I suggested that he should go home for a while. He had often spoken to me of the silent town, somewhere up in the north of Holland, where his parents still lived. They were poor people. His father was a carpenter, and they dwelt in a little old red-brick house, neat and clean, by the side of a sluggish canal. The streets were wide and empty; for two hundred years the place had been dying, but the houses had the homely stateliness of their time. Rich merchants, sending their wares to the distant Indies, had lived in them calm and prosperous lives, and in their decent decay they kept still an aroma of their splendid past. You could wander along the canal till you came to broad green fields, with windmills here and there, in which cattle, black and white, grazed lazily. I thought that among those surroundings, with their recollections of his boyhood, Dirk Stroeve would forget his unhappiness. But he would not go.

"I must be here when she needs me," he repeated. "It would be dreadful if something terrible happened and I were not at hand."

"What do you think is going to happen?" I asked.

"I don't know. But I'm afraid."

I shrugged my shoulders.

For all his pain, Dirk Stroeve remained a ridiculous object. He might have excited sympathy if he had grown worn and thin. He did nothing of the kind. He remained fat, and his round, red cheeks shone like ripe apples. He had great neatness of person, and he continued to wear his spruce black coat and his bowler hat, always a little too small for him, in a dapper, jaunty manner. He was getting something of a paunch, and sorrow had no effect on it. He looked more than ever like a prosperous bagman. It is hard that a man's exterior should tally so little sometimes with his soul. Dirk Stroeve had the passion of Romeo in the body of Sir Toby Belch. He had a sweet and generous nature, and yet was always blundering; a real feeling for what was beautiful and the capacity to create only what was commonplace; a peculiar delicacy of sentiment and gross manners. He could exercise tact when dealing

with the affairs of others, but none when dealing with his own. What a cruel practical joke old Nature played when she flung so many contradictory elements together, and left the man face to face with the perplexing callousness of the universe.

CHAPTER XXXII

I DID not see Strickland for several weeks. I was disgusted with him, and if I had had an opportunity should have been glad to tell him so, but I saw no object in seeking him out for the purpose. I am a little shy of any assumption of moral indignation; there is always in it an element of self-satisfaction which makes it awkward to anyone who has a sense of humour. It requires a very lively passion to steel me to my own ridicule. There was a sardonic sincerity in Strickland which made me sensitive to anything that might suggest a pose.

But one evening when I was passing along the Avenue de Clichy in front of the café which Strickland frequented and which I now avoided, I ran straight into him. He was accompanied by Blanche Stroeve, and they were just going to Strickland's favourite corner.

"Where the devil have you been all this time?" said he. "I thought you must be away."

His cordiality was proof that he knew I had no wish to speak to him. He was not a man with whom it was worth while wasting politeness.

"No," I said; "I haven't been away."

"Why haven't you been here?"

"There are more cafés in Paris than one, at which to trifle away an idle hour."

Blanche then held out her hand and bade me good-evening. I do not know why I had expected her to be somehow changed; she wore the same grey dress that she wore so often, neat and becoming, and her brow was as candid, her eyes as untroubled, as when I had been used to see her occupied with her household duties in the studio.

"Come and have a game of chess," said Strickland.

I do not know why at the moment I could think of no excuse. I followed them rather sulkily to the table at which Strickland always sat, and he called for the board and the chessmen. They

both took the situation so much as a matter of course that I felt it absurd to do otherwise. Mrs. Stroeve watched the game with inscrutable face. She was silent, but she had always been silent. I looked at her mouth for an expression that could give me a clue to what she felt; I watched her eyes for some tell-tale flash, some hint of dismay or bitterness; I scanned her brow for any passing line that might indicate a settling emotion. Her face was a mask that told nothing. Her hands lay on her lap motionless, one in the other loosely clasped. I knew from what I had heard that she was a woman of violent passions; and that injurious blow that she had given Dirk, the man who had loved her so devotedly, betrayed a sudden temper and a horrid cruelty. She had abandoned the safe shelter of her husband's protection and the comfortable ease of a well-provided establishment for what she could not but see was an extreme hazard. It showed an eagerness for adventure, a readiness for the hand-to-mouth, which the care she took of her home and her love of good housewifery made not a little remarkable. She must be a woman of complicated character, and there was something dramatic in the contrast of that with her demure appearance.

I was excited by the encounter, and my fancy worked busily while I sought to concentrate myself on the game I was playing. I always tried my best to beat Strickland, because he was a player who despised the opponent he vanquished; his exultation in victory made defeat more difficult to bear. On the other hand, if he was beaten he took it with complete good-humour. He was a bad winner and a good loser. Those who think that man betrays his character nowhere more clearly than when he is playing a game might on this draw subtle inferences.

When he had finished I called the waiter to pay for the drinks, and left them. The meeting had been devoid of incident. No word had been said to give me anything to think about and any surmises I might make were unwarranted. I was intrigued. I could not tell how they were getting on. I would have given much to be a disembodied spirit so that I could see them in the privacy of the studio and hear what they talked about. I had not the smallest indication on which to let my imagination work.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Two or three days later Dirk Stroeve called on me.

"I hear you've seen Blanche," he said.

"How on earth did you find out?"

"I was told by someone who saw you sitting with them. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought it would only pain you."

"What do I care if it does? You must know that I want to hear the smallest thing about her."

I waited for him to ask me questions.

"What does she look like?" he said.

"Absolutely unchanged."

"Does she seem happy?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"How can I tell? We were in a café; we were playing chess; I had no opportunity to speak to her."

"Oh, but couldn't you tell by her face?"

I shook my head. I could only repeat that by no word, by no hinted gesture, had she given an indication of her feelings. He must know better than I how great were her powers of self-control. He clasped his hands emotionally.

"Oh, I'm so frightened. I know something is going to happen, something terrible, and I can do nothing to stop it."

"What sort of thing?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know," he moaned, seizing his head with his hands. "I foresee some terrible catastrophe."

Stroeve had always been excitable, but now he was beside himself; there was no reasoning with him. I thought it probable enough that Blanche Stroeve would not continue to find life with Strickland tolerable, but one of the falsest of proverbs is that you must lie on the bed that you have made. The experience of life shows that people are constantly doing things which must lead to disaster, and yet by some chance manage to evade the result of their folly. When Blanche quarrelled with Strickland she had only to leave him, and her husband was waiting humbly to forgive and forget. I was not prepared to feel any great sympathy for her.

"You see, you don't love her," said Stroeve.

"After all, there's nothing to prove that she is unhappy. For all we know they may have settled down into a most domestic couple."

Stroeve gave me a look with his woeful eyes.

"Of course it doesn't much matter to you, but to me it's so serious, so intensely serious."

I was sorry if I had seemed impatient or flippant.

"Will you do something for me?" asked Stroeve.

"Willingly."

"Will you write to Blanche for me?"

"Why can't you write yourself?"

"I've written over and over again. I didn't expect her to answer. I don't think she reads the letters."

"You make no account of feminine curiosity. Do you think she could resist?"

"She could—mine."

I looked at him quickly. He lowered his eyes. That answer of his seemed to me strangely humiliating. He was conscious that she regarded him with an indifference so profound that the sight of his handwriting would have not the slightest effect on her.

"Do you really believe that she'll ever come back to you?" I asked.

"I want her to know that if the worst comes to the worst she can count on me. That's what I want you to tell her."

I took a sheet of paper.

"What is it exactly you wish me to say?"

This is what I wrote:

Dear Mrs. Stroeve,

Dirk wishes me to tell you that if at any time you want him he will be grateful for the opportunity of being of service to you. He has no ill-feeling towards you on account of anything that has happened. His love for you is unaltered. You will always find him at the following address.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BUT though I was no less convinced than Stroeve that the connection between Strickland and Blanche would end disastrously, I did not expect the issue to take the tragic form it did. The summer came, breathless and sultry, and even at night there was no coolness to rest one's jaded nerves. The sun-baked streets

seemed to give back the heat that had beat down on them during the day, and the passers-by dragged their feet along them wearily. I had not seen Strickland for weeks. Occupied with other things, I had ceased to think of him and his affairs. Dirk, with his vain lamentations, had begun to bore me, and I avoided his society. It was a sordid business, and I was not inclined to trouble myself with it further.

One morning I was working. I sat in my pyjamas. My thoughts wandered, and I thought of the sunny beaches of Brittany and the freshness of the sea. By my side was the empty bowl in which the concierge had brought me my *café au lait* and the fragment of *croissant* which I had not had appetite enough to eat. I heard the concierge in the next room emptying my bath. There was a tinkle at my bell, and I left her to open the door. In a moment I heard Stroeve's voice asking if I was in. Without moving, I shouted to him to come in. He entered the room quickly, and came up to the table at which I sat.

"She's killed herself," he said hoarsely.

"What do you mean?" I cried, startled.

He made movements with his lips as though he were speaking, but no sound issued from them. He gibbered like an idiot. My heart thumped against my ribs, and, I do not know why, I flew into a temper.

"For God's sake, collect yourself, man," I said. "What on earth are you talking about?"

He made despairing gestures with his hands, but still no words came from his mouth. He might have been struck dumb. I do not know what came over me; I took him by the shoulders and shook him. Looking back, I am vexed that I made such a fool of myself; I suppose the last restless nights had shaken my nerves more than I knew.

"Let me sit down," he gasped at length.

I filled a glass with St. Galmier and gave it to him to drink. I held it to his mouth as though he were a child. He gulped down a mouthful, and some of it was spilt on his shirt-front.

"Who's killed herself?"

I do not know why I asked, for I knew whom he meant. He made an effort to collect himself.

"They had a row last night. He went away."

"Is she dead?"

"No; they've taken her to the hospital."

"Then what are you talking about?" I cried impatiently. "Why did you say she'd killed herself?"

"Don't be cross with me. I can't tell you anything if you talk to me like that."

I clenched my hands, seeking to control my irritation. I attempted a smile.

"I'm sorry. Take your time. Don't hurry, there's a good fellow."

His round blue eyes behind the spectacles were ghastly with terror. The magnifying-glasses he wore distorted them.

"When the concierge went up this morning to take a letter she could get no answer to her ring. She heard someone groaning. The door wasn't locked, and she went in. Blanche was lying on the bed. She'd been frightfully sick. There was a bottle of oxalic acid on the table."

Stroeve hid his face in his hands and swayed backwards and forwards, groaning.

"Was she conscious?"

"Yes. Oh, if you knew how she's suffering! I can't bear it. I can't bear it."

His voice rose to a shriek.

"Damn it all, you haven't got to bear it," I cried impatiently. "She's got to bear it."

"How can you be so cruel!"

"What have you done?"

"They sent for a doctor and for me, and they told the police. I'd given the concierge twenty francs, and told her to send for me if anything happened."

He paused a minute, and I saw that what he had to tell me was very hard to say.

"When I went she wouldn't speak to me. She told them to send me away. I swore that I forgave her everything, but she wouldn't listen. She tried to beat her head against the wall. The doctor told me that I mustn't remain with her. She kept on saying, 'Send him away!' I went, and waited in the studio. And when the ambulance came and they put her on a stretcher, they made me go in the kitchen so that she shouldn't know I was there."

While I dressed—for Stroeve wished me to go at once with him to the hospital—he told me that he had arranged for his wife to have a private room, so that she might at least be spared the sordid promiscuity of a ward. On our way he explained to me why he

desired my presence; if she still refused to see him/ perhaps she would see me. He begged me to repeat to her that he loved her still; he would reproach her for nothing, but desired only to help her; he made no claim on her, and on her recovery would not seek to induce her to return to him; she would be perfectly free.

But when we arrived at the hospital, a gaunt, cheerless building, the mere sight of which was enough to make one's heart sick, and after being directed from this official to that, up endless stairs and through long, bare corridors, found the doctor in charge of the case, we were told that the patient was too ill to see anyone that day. The doctor was a little bearded man in white, with an off-hand manner. He evidently looked upon a case as a case, and anxious relatives as a nuisance which must be treated with firmness. Moreover, to him the affair was commonplace; it was just an hysterical woman who had quarrelled with her lover and taken poison; it was constantly happening. At first he thought that Dirk was the cause of the disaster, and he was needlessly brusque with him. When I explained that he was the husband, anxious to forgive, the doctor looked at him suddenly, with curious, searching eyes. I seemed to see in them a hint of mockery; it was true that Stroeve had the head of the husband who is deceived. The doctor faintly shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no immediate danger," he said, in answer to our questioning. "One doesn't know how much she took. It may be that she will get off with a fright. Women are constantly trying to commit suicide for love, but generally they take care not to succeed. It's generally a gesture to arouse pity or terror in their lover."

There was in his tone a frigid contempt. It was obvious that to him Blanche Stroeve was only a unit to be added to the statistical list of attempted suicides in the city of Paris during the current year. He was busy, and could waste no more time on us. He told us that if we came at a certain hour next day, should Blanche be better, it might be possible for her husband to see her.

CHAPTER XXXV

I SCARCELY know how we got through that day. Stroeve could not bear to be alone, and I exhausted myself in efforts to distract him.

I took him to the Louvre, and he pretended to look at pictures, but I saw that his thoughts were constantly with his wife. I forced him to eat, and after luncheon I induced him to lie down, but he could not sleep. He accepted willingly my invitation to remain for a few days in my apartment. I gave him books to read, but after a page or two he would put the book down and stare miserably into space. During the evening we played innumerable games of piquet, and bravely, not to disappoint my efforts, he tried to appear interested. Finally I gave him a draught, and he sank into uneasy slumber.

When we went again to the hospital we saw a nursing sister. She told us that Blanche seemed a little better, and she went in to ask if she would see her husband. We heard voices in the room in which she lay, and presently the nurse returned to say that the patient refused to see anyone. We told her that if she refused to see Dirk the nurse was to ask if she would see me, but this she refused also. Dirk's lips trembled.

"I dare not insist," said the nurse. "She is too ill. Perhaps in a day or two she may change her mind."

"Is there anyone else she wants to see?" asked Dirk, in a voice so low it was almost a whisper.

"She says she only wants to be left in peace."

Dirk's hands moved strangely, as though they had nothing to do with his body, with a movement of their own.

"Will you tell her that if there is anyone else she wishes to see I will bring him? I only want her to be happy."

The nurse looked at him with her calm, kind eyes, which had seen all the horror and pain of the world, and yet, filled with the vision of a world without sin, remained serene.

"I will tell her when she is a little calmer."

Dirk, filled with compassion, begged her to take the message at once.

"It may cure her. I beseech you to ask her now."

With a faint smile of pity, the nurse went back into the room. We heard her low voice, and then, in a voice I did not recognise, the answer:

"No No. No."

The nurse came out again and shook her head.

"Was that she who spoke then?" I asked. "Her voice sounded so strange."

"It appears that her vocal cords have been burnt by the acid."

Dirk gave a low cry of distress. I asked him to go on and wait for me at the entrance, for I wanted to say something to the nurse. He did not ask what it was, but went silently. He seemed to have lost all power of will; he was like an obedient child.

"Has she told you why she did it?" I asked.

"No. She won't speak. She lies on her back quite quietly. She doesn't move for hours at a time. But she cries always. Her pillow is all wet. She's too weak to use a handkerchief, and the tears just run down her face."

It gave me a sudden wrench of the heart-strings. I could have killed Strickland then, and I knew that my voice was trembling when I bade the nurse good-bye.

I found Dirk waiting for me on the steps. He seemed to see nothing, and did not notice that I had joined him till I touched him on the arm. We walked along in silence, I tried to imagine what had happened to drive the poor creature to that dreadful step. I presumed that Strickland knew what had happened, for someone must have been to see him from the police, and he must have made his statement. I did not know where he was. I supposed he had gone back to the shabby attic which served him as a studio. It was curious that she should not wish to see him. Perhaps she refused to have him sent for because she knew he would refuse to come. I wondered what an abyss of cruelty she must have looked into that in horror she refused to live.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE next week was dreadful. Stroeve went twice a day to the hospital to enquire after his wife, who still declined to see him; and came away at first relieved and hopeful because he was told that she seemed to be growing better, and then in despair because, the complication which the doctor had feared having ensued, recovery was impossible. The nurse was pitiful to his distress, but she had little to say that could console him. The poor woman lay quite still, refusing to speak, with her eyes intent, as though she watched for the coming of death. It could now be only a question of a day or two; and when, late one evening, Stroeve came to see me I knew it was to tell me that she was dead. He was absolutely exhausted. His volubility had left him at last, and he sank down

wearily on my sofa. I felt that no words of condolence availed, and I let him lie there quietly. I feared he would think it heartless if I read, so I sat by the window, smoking a pipe, till he felt inclined to speak.

"You've been very kind to me," he said at last. "Everyone's been very kind."

"Nonsense," I said, a little embarrassed.

"At the hospital they told me I might wait. They gave me a chair, and I sat outside the door. When she became unconscious they said I might go in. Her mouth and chin were all burnt by the acid. It was awful to see her lovely skin all wounded. She died very peacefully, so that I didn't know she was dead till the sister told me."

He was too tired to weep. He lay on his back limply, as though all the strength had gone out of his limbs, and presently I saw that he had fallen asleep. It was the first natural sleep he had had for a week. Nature, sometimes so cruel, is sometimes merciful. I covered him and turned down the light. In the morning when I awoke he was still asleep. He had not moved. His gold-rimmed spectacles were still on his nose.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE circumstances of Blanche Stroeve's death necessitated all manner of dreadful formalities, but at last we were allowed to bury her. Dirk and I alone followed the hearse to the cemetery. We went at a foot-pace, but on the way back we trotted, and there was something to my mind singularly horrible in the way the driver of the hearse whipped up his horses. It seemed to dismiss the dead with a shrug of the shoulders. Now and then I caught sight of the swaying hearse in front of us, and our own driver urged his pair so that we might not remain behind. I felt in myself, too, the desire to get the whole thing out of my mind. I was beginning to be bored with a tragedy that did not really concern me, and pretending to myself that I spoke in order to distract Stroeve, I turned with relief to other subjects.

"Don't you think you'd better go away for a bit?" I said. "There can be no object in your staying in Paris now."

He did not answer, but I went on ruthlessly:

"Have you made any plans for the immediate future?"

"No."

"You must try and gather together the thread again. Why don't you go down to Italy and start working?"

Again he made no reply, but the driver of our carriage came to my rescue. Slackening his pace for a moment, he leaned over and spoke. I could not hear what he said, so I put my head out of the window; he wanted to know where we wished to be set down. I told him to wait a minute.

"You'd better come and have lunch with me," I said to Dirk. "I'll tell him to drop us in the Place Pigalle."

"I'd rather not. I want to go to the studio."

I hesitated a moment.

"Would you like me to come with you?" I asked then.

"No; I should prefer to be alone."

"All right."

I gave the driver the necessary direction, and in renewed silence we drove on. Dirk had not been to the studio since the wretched morning on which they had taken Blanche to the hospital. I was glad he did not want me to accompany him, and when I left him at the door I walked away with relief. I took a new pleasure in the streets of Paris, and I looked with smiling eyes at the people who hurried to and fro. The day was fine and sunny, and I felt in myself a more acute delight in life. I could not help it; I put Stroeve and his sorrows out of my mind. I wanted to enjoy.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

I DID not see him again for nearly a week. Then he fetched me soon after seven one evening and took me out to dinner. He was dressed in the deepest mourning, and on his bowler was a broad black band. He had even a black border to his handkerchief. His garb of woe suggested that he had lost in one catastrophe every relation he had in the world, even to cousins by marriage twice removed. His plumpness and his red, fat cheeks made his mourning not a little incongruous. It was cruel that his extreme unhappiness should have in it something of buffoonery.

He told me he had made up his mind to go away, though not to Italy, as I had suggested, but to Holland.

"I'm starting to-morrow. This is perhaps the last time we shall ever meet."

I made an appropriate rejoinder, and he smiled wanly.

"I haven't been home for five years. I think I'd forgotten it all; I seemed to have come so far away from my father's house that I was shy at the idea of revisiting it; but now I feel it's my only refuge."

He was sore and bruised, and his thoughts went back to the tenderness of his mother's love. The ridicule he had endured for years seemed now to weigh him down, and the final blow of Blanche's treachery had robbed him of the resiliency which had made him take it so gaily. He could no longer laugh with those who laughed at him. He was an outcast. He told me of his childhood in the tidy brick house, and of his mother's passionate orderliness. Her kitchen was a miracle of clean brightness. Everything was always in its place, and nowhere could you see a speck of dust. Cleanliness, indeed, was a mania with her. I saw a neat little old woman, with cheeks like apples, toiling away from morning to night, through the long years, to keep her house trim and spruce. His father was a spare old man, his hands gnarled after the work of a lifetime, silent and upright; in the evening he read the paper aloud, while his wife and daughter (now married to the captain of a fishing smack), unwilling to lose a moment, bent over their sewing. Nothing ever happened in that little town, left behind by the advance of civilisation, and one year followed the next till death came, like a friend, to give rest to those who had laboured so diligently.

"My father wished me to become a carpenter like himself. For five generations we've carried on the same trade, from father to son. Perhaps that is the wisdom of life, to tread in your father's steps, and look neither to the right nor to the left. When I was a little boy I said I would marry the daughter of the harness-maker who lived next door. She was a little girl with blue eyes and a flaxen pigtail. She would have kept my house like a new pin, and I should have had a son to carry on the business after me."

Stroeve sighed a little and was silent. His thoughts dwelt among pictures of what might have been, and the safety of the life he had refused filled him with longing.

"The world is hard and cruel. We are here none knows why, and we go none knows whither. We must be very humble. We must see the beauty of quietness. We must go through life so inconspicuously that Fate does not notice us. And let us seek the

love of simple, ignorant people. Their ignorance is better than all our knowledge. Let us be silent, content in our little corner, meek and gentle like them. That is the wisdom of life."

To me it was his broken spirit that expressed itself, and I rebelled against his renunciation. But I kept my own counsel.

"What made you think of being a painter?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"It happened that I had a knack for drawing. I got prizes for it at school. My poor mother was very proud of my gift, and she gave me a box of water-colours as a present. She showed my sketches to the pastor and the doctor and the judge. And they sent me to Amsterdam to try for a scholarship, and I won it. Poor soul, she was so proud; and though it nearly broke her heart to part from me, she smiled, and would not show me her grief. She was pleased that her son should be an artist. They pinched and saved so that I should have enough to live on, and when my first picture was exhibited they came to Amsterdam to see it, my father and mother and my sister, and my mother cried when she looked at it." His kind eyes glistened. "And now on every wall of the old house there is one of my pictures in a beautiful gold frame."

He glowed with happy pride. I thought of those cold scenes of his, with their picturesque peasants and cypresses and olive trees. They must look queer in their garish frames on the walls of the peasant house.

"The dear soul thought she was doing a wonderful thing for me when she made me an artist, but perhaps, after all, it would have been better for me if my father's will had prevailed and I were now but an honest carpenter."

"Now that you know what art can offer, would you change your life? Would you have missed all the delight it has given you?"

"Art is the greatest thing in the world," he answered, after a pause.

He looked at me for a minute reflectively; he seemed to hesitate; then he said:

"Did you know that I had been to see Strickland?"

"You?"

I was astonished. I should have thought he could not bear to set eyes on him. Stroeve smiled faintly.

"You know already that I have no proper pride."

"What do you mean by that?"

He told me a singular story.

CHAPTER XXXIX

WHEN I left him, after we had buried poor Blanche, Stroeve walked into the house with a heavy heart. Something impelled him to go to the studio, some obscure desire for self-torture, and yet he dreaded the anguish that he foresaw. He dragged himself up the stairs; his feet seemed unwilling to carry him; and outside the door he lingered for a long time, trying to summon up courage to go in. He felt horribly sick. He had an impulse to run down the stairs after me and beg me to go in with him; he had a feeling that there was somebody in the studio. He remembered how often he had waited for a minute or two on the landing to get his breath after the ascent, and how absurdly his impatience to see Blanche had taken it away again. To see her was a delight that never staled, and even though he had not been out an hour he was as excited at the prospect as if they had been parted for a month. Suddenly he could not believe that she was dead. What had happened could only be a dream, a frightful dream; and when he turned the key and opened the door, he would see her bending slightly over the table in the gracious attitude of the woman in Chardin's *Benedicite*, which always seemed to him so exquisite. Horriedly he took the key out of his pocket, opened, and walked in.

The apartment had no look of desertion. His wife's tidiness was one of the traits which had so much pleased him; his own upbringing had given him a tender sympathy for the delight in orderliness; and when he had seen her instinctive desire to put each thing in its appointed place it had given him a little warm feeling in his heart. The bedroom looked as though she had just left it: the brushes were neatly placed on the toilet-table, one on each side of the comb; someone had smoothed down the bed on which she had spent her last night in the studio; and her night-dress in a little case lay on the pillow. It was impossible to believe that she would never come into that room again.

But he felt thirsty, and went into the kitchen to get himself some water. Here, too, was order. On a rack were the plates that she had used for dinner on the night of her quarrel with Strickland, and they had been carefully washed. The knives and forks were put away in a drawer. Under a cover were the remains of a piece of cheese, and in a tin box was a crust of bread. She had done her marketing from day to day, buying only what was strictly needful,

so that nothing was left over from one day to the next. Stroeve knew from the enquiries made by the police that Strickland had walked out of the house immediately after dinner, and the fact that Blanche had washed up the things as usual gave him a little thrill of horror. Her methodicalness made her suicide more deliberate. Her self-possession was frightening. A sudden pang seized him, and his knees felt so weak that he almost fell. He went back into the bedroom and threw himself on the bed. He cried out her name:

"Blanche. Blanche."

The thought of her suffering was intolerable. He had a sudden vision of her standing in the kitchen—it was hardly larger than a cupboard—washing the plates and glasses, the forks and spoons, giving the knives a rapid polish on the knife-board; and then putting everything away, giving the sink a scrub, and hanging the dish-cloth up to dry—it was there still, a grey, torn rag; then looking round to see that everything was clean and nice. He saw her roll down her sleeves and remove her apron—the apron hung on a peg behind the door—and take the bottle of oxalic acid and go with it into the bedroom.

The agony of it drove him up from the bed and out of the room. He went into the studio. It was dark, for the curtains had been drawn over the great window, and he pulled them quickly back; but a sob broke from him as with a rapid glance he took in the place where he had been so happy. Nothing was changed here, either. Strickland was indifferent to his surroundings, and he had lived in the other's studio without thinking of altering a thing. It was deliberately artistic. It represented Stroeve's idea of the proper environment for an artist. There were bits of old brocade on the walls, and the piano was covered with a piece of silk, beautiful and tarnished; in one corner was a copy of the *Venus of Milo*, and in another of the *Venus of the Medici*. Here and there was an Italian cabinet surmounted with delf, and here and there a bas-relief. In a handsome gold frame was a copy of Velasquez' *Innocent X.*, that Stroeve had made in Rome, and placed so as to make the most of their decorative effect were a number of Stroeve's pictures, all in splendid frames. Stroeve had always been very proud of his taste. He had never lost his appreciation, for the romantic atmosphere of a studio, and though now the sight of it was like a stab in his heart, without thinking what he was at, he changed slightly the position of a Louis XV table which was one

of his treasures. Suddenly he caught sight of a canvas with its face to the wall. It was a much larger one than he himself was in the habit of using, and he wondered what it did there. He went over to it and leaned it towards him so that he could see the painting. It was a nude. His heart began to beat quickly, for he guessed at once that it was one of Strickland's pictures. He flung it back against the wall angrily—what did he mean by leaving it there?—but his movement caused it to fall, face downwards, on the ground. No matter whose the picture, he could not leave it there in the dust, and he raised it; but then curiosity got the better of him. He thought he would like to have a proper look at it, so he brought it along and set it on the easel. Then he stood back in order to see it at his ease.

He gave a gasp. It was the picture of a woman lying on a sofa, with one arm beneath her head and the other along her body; one knee was raised, and the other leg was stretched out. The pose was classic. Stroeve's head swam. It was Blanche. Grief and jealousy and rage seized him, and he cried out hoarsely; he was inarticulate; he clenched his fists and raised them threateningly at an invisible enemy. He screamed at the top of his voice. He was beside himself. He could not bear it. That was too much. He looked round wildly for some instrument; he wanted to hack the picture to pieces; it should not exist another minute. He could see nothing that would serve his purpose; he rummaged about his painting things; somehow he could not find a thing; he was frantic. At last he came upon what he sought, a large scraper, and he pounced on it with a cry of triumph. He seized it as though it were a dagger, and ran to the picture.

As Stroeve told me this he became as excited as when the incident occurred, and he took hold of a dinner-knife on the table between us, and brandished it. He lifted his arm as though to strike, and then, opening his hand, let it fall with a clatter to the ground. He looked at me with a tremulous smile. He did not speak.

"Fire away," I said.

"I don't know what happened to me. I was just going to make a great hole in the picture, I had my arm all ready for the blow, when suddenly I seemed to see it."

"See what?"

"The picture. It was a work of art. I couldn't touch it. I was afraid."

Stroeve was silent again, and he stared at me with his mouth open and his round blue eyes starting out of his head.

"It was a great, a wonderful picture. I was seized with awe. I had nearly committed a dreadful crime. I moved a little to see it better, and my foot knocked against the scraper. I shuddered."

I really felt something of the emotion that had caught him. I was strangely impressed. It was as though I were suddenly transported into a world in which the values were changed. I stood by, at a loss, like a stranger in a land where the reactions of man to familiar things are all different from those he has known. Stroeve tried to talk to me about the picture, but he was incoherent, and I had to guess at what he meant. Strickland had burst the bonds that hitherto had held him. He had found, not himself, as the phrase goes, but a new soul with unsuspected powers. It was not only the bold simplification of the drawing which showed so rich and so singular a personality; it was not only the painting, though the flesh was painted with a passionate sensuality which had in it something miraculous; it was not only the solidity, so that you felt extraordinarily the weight of the body; there was also a spirituality, troubling and new, which led the imagination along unsuspected ways, and suggested dim empty spaces, lit only by the eternal stars, where the soul, all naked, adventured fearful to the discovery of new mysteries.

If I am rhetorical it is because Stroeve was rhetorical. (Do we not know that man in moments of emotion expresses himself naturally in the terms of a novelette?) Stroeve was trying to express a feeling which he had never known before, and he did not know how to put it into common terms. He was like the mystic seeking to describe the ineffable. But one fact he made clear to me: people talk of beauty lightly and, having no feeling for words, they use that one carelessly, so that it loses its force; and the thing it stands for, sharing its name with a hundred trivial objects, is deprived of dignity. They call beautiful a dress, a dog, a sermon; and when they are face to face with Beauty cannot recognise it. The false emphasis with which they try to deck their worthless thoughts blunts their susceptibilities. Like the charlatan who counterfeits a spiritual force he has sometimes felt, they lose the power they have abused. But Stroeve, the unconquerable buffoon, had a love and an understanding of beauty which were as honest and sincere as was his own sincere and honest soul. It meant to him what God means to the believer, and when he saw it he was afraid.

"What did you say to Strickland when you saw him?"

"I asked him to come with me to Holland."

I was dumbfounded. I could only look at Stroeve in stupid amazement.

"We both loved Blanche. There would have been room for him in my mother's house. I think the company of poor, simple people would have done his soul a great good. I think he might have learnt from them something that would be very useful to him."

"What did he say?"

"He smiled a little. I suppose he thought me very silly. He said he had other fish to fry."

I could have wished that Strickland had used some other phrase to indicate his refusal.

"He gave me the picture of Blanche."

I wondered why Strickland had done that. But I made no remark, and for some time we kept silence.

"What have you done with all your things?" I said at last.

"I got a Jew in, and he gave me a round sum for the lot. I'm taking my pictures home with me. Beside them I own nothing in the world now but a box of clothes and a few books."

"I'm glad you're going home," I said.

I felt that his chance was to put all the past behind him. I hoped that the grief which now seemed intolerable would be softened by the lapse of time, and a merciful forgetfulness would help him to take up once more the burden of life. He was young still, and in a few years he would look back on all his misery with a sadness in which there would be something not unpleasurable. Sooner or later he would marry some honest soul in Holland, and I felt sure he would be happy. I smiled at the thought of the vast number of bad pictures he would paint before he died.

Next day I saw him off for Amsterdam.

CHAPTER XL

FOR the next month, occupied with my own affairs, I saw no one connected with this lamentable business, and my mind ceased to be occupied with it. But one day, when I was walking along, bent on

some errand, I passed Charles Strickland. The sight of him brought back to me all the horror which I was not unwilling to forget, and I felt in me a sudden repulsion for the cause of it. Nodding, for it would have been childish to cut him, I walked on quickly; but in a minute I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"You're in a great hurry," he said cordially.

It was characteristic of him to display geniality with anyone who showed a disinclination to meet him, and the coolness of my greeting can have left him in little doubt of that.

"I am," I answered briefly.

"I'll walk along with you," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"For the pleasure of your society."

I did not answer, and he walked by my side silently. We continued thus for perhaps a quarter of a mile. I began to feel a little ridiculous. At last we passed a stationer's, and it occurred to me that I might as well buy some paper. It would be an excuse to be rid of him.

"I'm going in here," I said. "Good-bye."

"I'll wait for you."

I shrugged my shoulders, and went into the shop. I reflected that French paper was bad, and that, foiled of my purpose, I need not burden myself with a purchase that I did not need. I asked for something I knew could not be provided, and in a minute came out into the street.

"Did you get what you wanted?" he asked.

"No."

We walked on in silence, and then came to a place where several streets met. I stopped at the kerb.

"Which way do you go?" I enquired.

"Your way," he smiled.

"I'm going home."

"I'll come along with you and smoke a pipe."

"You might wait for an invitation," I retorted frigidly.

"I would if I thought there was any chance of getting one."

"Do you see that wall in front of you?" I said, pointing.

"Yes."

"In that case I should have thought you could see also that I don't want your company."

"I vaguely suspected it, I confess."

I could not help a chuckle. It is one of the defects of my

character that I cannot altogether dislike anyone who makes me laugh. But I pulled myself together.

"I think you're detestable. You're the most loathsome beast that it's ever been my misfortune to meet. Why do you seek the society of someone who hates and despises you?"

"My dear fellow, what the hell do you suppose I care what you think of me?"

"Damn it all," I said, more violently because I had an inkling my motive was none too creditable, "I don't want to know you."

"Are you afraid I shall corrupt you?"

His tone made me feel not a little ridiculous. I knew that he was looking at me sideways, with a sardonic smile.

"I suppose you are hard up," I remarked insolently.

"I should be a damned fool if I thought I had any chance of borrowing money from you."

"You've come down in the world if you can bring yourself to flatter."

He grinned.

"You'll never really dislike me so long as I give you the opportunity to get off a good thing now and then."

I had to bite my lip to prevent myself from laughing. What he said had a hateful truth in it, and another defect of my character & that I enjoy the company of those, however depraved, who can give me a Roland for my Oliver. I began to feel that my abhorrence for Strickland could only be sustained by an effort on my part. I recognised my moral weakness, but saw that my disapprobation had in it already something of a pose; and I knew that if I felt it, his own keen instinct had discovered it too. He was certainly laughing at me up his sleeve. I left him the last word, and sought refuge in a shrug of the shoulders and taciturnity.

CHAPTER XLI

WE arrived at the house in which I lived. I would not ask him to come in with me, but walked up the stairs without a word. He followed me and entered the apartment on my heels. He had not been in it before, but he never gave a glance at the room I had been at pains to make pleasing to the eye. There was a tin of tobacco on the table, and, taking out his pipe, he filled it. He sat down

on the only chair that had no arms and tilted himself, on the back legs.

"If you're going to make yourself at home, why don't you sit in an arm-chair?" I asked irritably.

"Why are you concerned about my comfort?"

"I'm not," I retorted, "but only about my own. It makes me uncomfortable to see someone sit on an uncomfortable chair."

He chuckled, but did not move. He smoked on in silence, taking no further notice of me, and apparently was absorbed in thought. I wondered why he had come.

Until long habit has blunted the sensibility, there is something disconcerting to the writer in the instinct which causes him to take an interest in the singularities of human nature so absorbing that his moral sense is powerless against it. He recognises in himself an artistic satisfaction in the contemplation of evil which a little startles him; but sincerity forces him to confess that the disapproval he feels for certain actions is not nearly so strong as his curiosity in their reasons. The character of a scoundrel, logical and complete, has a fascination for his creator which is an outrage to law and order. I expect that Shakespeare devised Iago with a gusto which he never knew when, weaving moonbeams with his fancy, he imagined Desdemona. It may be that in his rogues the writer gratifies instincts deep-rooted in him, which the manners and customs of a civilised world have forced back to the mysterious recesses of the subconscious. In giving to the character of his invention flesh and bones he is giving life to that part of himself which finds no other means of expression. His satisfaction is a sense of liberation.

The writer is more concerned to know than to judge.

There was in my soul a perfectly genuine horror of Strickland, and side by side with it a cold curiosity to discover his motives. I was puzzled by him, and I was eager to see how he regarded the tragedy he had caused in the lives of people who had used him with so much kindness. I applied the scalpel boldly.

"Stroeve told me that picture you painted of his wife was the best thing you've ever done."

Strickland took his pipe out of his mouth, and a smile lit up his eyes.

"It was great fun to do."

"Why did you give it him?"

"I'd finished it. It wasn't any good to me."

"Do you know that Stroeve nearly destroyed it?"

"It wasn't altogether satisfactory."

He was quiet for a moment or two, then he took his pipe out of his mouth again, and chuckled.

"Do you know that the little man came to see me?"

"Weren't you rather touched by what he had to say?"

"No; I thought it damned silly and sentimental."

"I suppose it escaped your memory that you'd ruined his life?" I remarked.

He rubbed his bearded chin reflectively.

"He's a very bad painter."

"But a very good man."

"And an excellent cook," Strickland added derisively.

His callousness was inhuman, and in my indignation I was not inclined to mince my words.

"As a mere matter of curiosity I wish you'd tell me, have you felt the smallest twinge of remorse for Blanche Stroeve's death?"

I watched his face for some change of expression, but it remained impassive.

"Why should I?" he asked.

"Let me put the facts before you. You were dying, and Dirk Stroeve took you into his own house. He nursed you like a mother. He sacrificed his time and his comfort and his money for you. He snatched you from the jaws of death."

Strickland shrugged his shoulders.

"The absurd little man enjoys doing things for other people. That's his life."

"Granting that you owed him no gratitude, were you obliged to go out of your way to take his wife from him? Until you came on the scene they were happy. Why couldn't you leave them alone?"

"What makes you think they were happy?"

"It was evident."

"You are a discerning fellow. Do you think she could ever have forgiven him for what he did for her?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you know why he married her?"

I shook my head.

"She was a governess in the family of some Roman prince, and the son of the house seduced her. She thought he was going to marry her. They turned her out into the street neck and crop.

She was going to have a baby, and she tried to commit suicide. Stroeve found her and married her."

"It was just like him. I never knew anyone with so compassionate a heart."

I had often wondered why that ill-assorted pair had married, but just that explanation had never occurred to me. That was perhaps the cause of the peculiar quality of Dirk's love for his wife. I had noticed in it something more than passion. I remembered also how I had always fancied that her reserve concealed I knew not what; but now I saw in it more than the desire to hide a shameful secret. Her tranquillity was like the sullen calm that broods over an island which has been swept by a hurricane. Her cheerfulness was the cheerfulness of despair. Strickland interrupted my reflections with an observation the profound cynicism of which startled me.

"A woman can forgive a man for the harm he does her," he said, "but she can never forgive him for the sacrifice he makes on her account."

"It must be reassuring to you to know that you certainly run no risk of incurring the resentment of the women you come in contact with," I retorted.

A slight smile broke on his lips.

"You are always prepared to sacrifice your principles for a repartee," he answered.

"What happened to the child?"

"Oh, it was still-born, three or four months after they were married."

Then I came to the question which had seemed to me most puzzling.

"Will you tell me why you bothered about Blanche Stroeve at all?"

He did not answer for so long that I nearly repeated it.

"How do I know?" he said at last. "She couldn't bear the sight of me. It amused me."

"I see."

He gave a sudden flash of anger.

"Damn it all, I wanted her."

But he recovered his temper immediately, and looked at me with a smile.

"At first she was horrified."

"Did you tell her?"

"There wasn't any need. She knew. I never said a word. She was frightened. At last I took her."

I do not know what there was in the way he told me this that extraordinarily suggested the violence of his desire. It was disconcerting and rather horrible. His life was strangely divorced from material things, and it was as though his body at times wreaked a fearful revenge on his spirit. The satyr in him suddenly took possession, and he was powerless in the grip of an instinct which had all the strength of the primitive forces of nature. It was an obsession so complete that there was no room in his soul for prudence or gratitude.

"But why did you want to take her away with you?" I asked.

"I didn't," he answered, frowning. "When she said she was coming I was nearly as surprised as Stroeve. I told her that when I'd had enough of her she'd have to go, and she said she'd risk that." He paused a little. "She had a wonderful body, and I wanted to paint a nude. When I'd finished my picture I took no more interest in her."

"And she loved you with all her heart."

He sprang to his feet and walked up and down the small room.

"I don't want love. I haven't time for it. It's weakness. I am a man, and sometimes I want a woman. When I've satisfied my passion I'm ready for other things. I can't overcome my desire, but I hate it; it imprisons my spirit; I look forward to the time when I shall be free from all desire and can give myself without hindrance to my work. Because women can do nothing except love, they've given it a ridiculous importance. They want to persuade us that it's the whole of life. It's an insignificant part. I know lust. That's normal and healthy. Love is a disease. Women are the instruments of my pleasure; I have no patience with their claim to be helpmates, partners, companions."

I had never heard Strickland speak so much at one time. He spoke with a passion of indignation. But neither here nor elsewhere do I pretend to give his exact words; his vocabulary was small, and he had no gift for framing sentences, so that one had to piece his meaning together out of interjections, the expression of his face, gestures and hackneyed phrases.

"You should have lived at a time when women were chattels and men the masters of slaves," I said.

"It just happens that I am a completely normal man."

I could not help laughing at this remark, made in all seriousness;

but he went on, walking up and down the room like a caged beast, intent on expressing what he felt but found such difficulty in putting coherently.

"When a woman loves you she's not satisfied until she possesses your soul. Because she's weak she has a rage for domination, and nothing less will satisfy her. She has a small mind, and she resents the abstract which she is unable to grasp. She is occupied with material things, and she is jealous of the ideal. The soul of man wanders through the uttermost regions of the universe, and she seeks to imprison it in the circle of her account book. Do you remember my wife? I saw Blanche little by little trying all her tricks. With infinite patience she prepared to snare me and bind me. She wanted to bring me down to her level; she cared nothing for me, she only wanted me to be hers. She was willing to do everything in the world for me except the one thing I wanted: to leave me alone."

I was silent for a while.

"What did you expect her to do when you left her?"

"She could have gone back to Stroeve," he said irritably. "He was ready to take her."

"You're inhuman," I answered. "It's as useless to talk to you about these things as to describe colours to a man who was born blind."

He stopped in front of my chair, and stood looking down at me with an expression in which I read a contemptuous amazement.

"Do you really care a twopenny damn if Blanche Stroeve is alive or dead?"

I thought over his question, for I wanted to answer it truthfully, at all events to my soul.

"It may be a lack of sympathy in myself if it does not make any great difference to me that she is dead. Life had a great deal to offer her. I think it's terrible that she should have been deprived of it in that cruel way, and I am ashamed because I do not really care."

"You have not the courage of your convictions. Life has no value. Blanche Stroeve didn't commit suicide because I left her, but because she was a foolish and unbalanced woman. But we've talked about her quite enough; she was an entirely unimportant person. Come, and I'll show you my pictures."

He spoke as though I were a child that needed to be distracted. I was sore, but not with him so much as with myself. I thought of

the happy life that pair had led in the cosy studio in Montmartre, Stroeve and his wife, their simplicity, kindness, and hospitality; it seemed to me cruel that it should have been broken to pieces by a ruthless chance; but the cruellest thing of all was that in fact it made no great difference. The world went on, and no one was a penny the worse for all that wretchedness. I had an idea that Dirk, a man of greater emotional reactions than depth of feeling, would soon forget; and Blanche's life, begun with who knows what bright hopes and what dreams, might just as well have never been lived. It all seemed useless and inane.

Strickland had found his hat, and stood looking at me.

"Are you coming?"

"Why do you seek my acquaintance?" I asked him. "You know that I hate and despise you."

He chuckled good-humouredly.

"Your only quarrel with me really is that I don't care a two-penny damn what you think about me."

I felt my cheeks grow red with sudden anger. It was impossible to make him understand that one might be outraged by his callous selfishness. I longed to pierce his armour of complete indifference. I knew also that in the end there was truth in what he said. Unconsciously, perhaps, we treasure the power we have over people by their regard for our opinion of them, and we hate those upon whom we have no such influence. I suppose it is the bitterest wound to human pride. But I would not let him see that I was put out.

"Is it possible for any man to disregard others entirely?" I said, though more to myself than to him. "You're dependent on others for everything in existence. It's a preposterous attempt to try to live only for yourself and by yourself. Sooner or later you'll be ill and tired and old, and then you'll crawl back into the herd. Won't you be ashamed when you feel in your heart the desire for comfort and sympathy? You're trying an impossible thing. Sooner or later the human being in you will yearn for the common bonds of humanity."

"Come and look at my pictures."

"Have you ever thought of death?"

"Why should I? It doesn't matter."

I stared at him. He stood before me, motionless; with a mocking smile in his eyes; but for all that, for a moment I had an inkling of a fiery, tortured spirit, aiming at something greater than could be

conceived by anything that was bound up with the flesh: I had a fleeting glimpse of a pursuit of the ineffable. I looked at the man before me in his shabby clothes, with his great nose and shining eyes, his red beard and untidy hair; and I had a strange sensation that it was only an envelope, and I was in the presence of a disembodied spirit.

"Let us go and look at your pictures," I said.

CHAPTER XLII

I DID not know why Strickland had suddenly offered to show them to me. I welcomed the opportunity. A man's work reveals him. In social intercourse he gives you the surface that he wishes the world to accept, and you can only gain a true knowledge of him by inferences from little actions, of which he is unconscious, and from fleeting expressions, which cross his face unknown to him. Sometimes people carry to such perfection the mask they have assumed that in due course they actually become the person they seem. But in his book or his picture the real man delivers himself defenceless. His pretentiousness will only expose his vacuity. The lath painted to look like iron is seen to be but a lath. No affectation of peculiarity can conceal a commonplace mind. To the acute observer no one can produce the most casual work without disclosing the innermost secrets of his soul.

As I walked up the endless stairs of the house in which Strickland lived, I confess that I was a little excited. It seemed to me that I was on the threshold of a surprising adventure. I looked about the room with curiosity. It was even smaller and more bare than I remembered it. I wondered what those friends of mine would say who demanded vast studios, and vowed they could not work unless all the conditions were to their liking.

"You'd better stand there," he said, pointing to a spot from which, presumably, he fancied I could see to best advantage what he had to show me.

"You don't want me to talk, I suppose," I said.

"No, blast you; I want you to hold your tongue."

He placed a picture on the easel, and let me look at it for a minute or two; then took it down and put another in its place. I think he showed me about thirty canvases. It was the result of the

six years during which he had been painting. He had never sold a picture. The canvases were of different sizes. The smaller were pictures of still-life and the largest were landscapes. There were about half a dozen portraits.

"That is the lot," he said at last.

I wish I could say that I recognised at once their beauty and their great originality. Now that I have seen many of them again and the rest are familiar to me in reproductions, I am astonished that at first sight I was bitterly disappointed. I felt nothing of the peculiar thrill which it is the property of art to give. The impression that Strickland's pictures gave me was disconcerting; and the fact remains, always to reproach me, that I never even thought of buying any. I missed a wonderful chance. Most of them have found their way into museums, and the rest are the treasured possessions of wealthy amateurs. I try to find excuses for myself. I think that my taste is good, but I am conscious that it has no originality. I know very little about painting, and I wander along trails that others have blazed for me. At that time I had the greatest admiration for the Impressionists. I longed to possess a Sisley and a Degas, and I worshipped Manet. His *Olympia* seemed to me the greatest picture of modern times, and *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* moved me profoundly. These works seemed to me the last word in painting.

I will not describe the pictures that Strickland showed me. Descriptions of pictures are always dull, and, these, besides, are familiar to all who take an interest in such things. Now that his influence has so enormously affected modern painting, now that others have charted the country which he was among the first to explore, Strickland's pictures, seen for the first time, would find the mind more prepared for them; but it must be remembered that I had never seen anything of the sort. First of all I was taken aback by what seemed to me the clumsiness of his technique. Accustomed to the drawing of the old masters, and convinced that Ingres was the greatest draughtsman of recent times, I thought that Strickland drew very badly. I knew nothing of the simplification at which he aimed. I remember a still-life of oranges on a plate, and I was bothered because the plate was not round and the oranges were lop-sided. The portraits were a little larger than life-size, and this gave them an ungainly look. To my eyes the faces looked like caricatures. They were painted in a way that was entirely new to me. The landscapes puzzled me even more. There

were two or three pictures of the forest of Fontainebleau and several of streets in Paris: my first feeling was that they might have been painted by a drunken cab-driver. I was perfectly bewildered. The colour seemed to me extraordinarily crude. It passed through my mind that the whole thing was a stupendous, incomprehensible farce. Now that I look back I am more than ever impressed by Stroeve's acuteness. He saw from the first that here was a revolution in art, and he recognised in its beginnings the genius which now all the world allows.

But if I was puzzled and disconcerted, I was not unimpressed. Even I, in my colossal ignorance, could not but feel that here, trying to express itself, was real power. I was excited and interested. I felt that these pictures had something to say to me that was very important for me to know, but I could not tell what it was. They seemed to me ugly, but they suggested without disclosing a secret of momentous significance. They were strangely tantalising. They gave me an emotion that I could not analyse. They said something that words were powerless to utter. I fancy that Strickland saw vaguely some spiritual meaning in material things that was so strange that he could only suggest it with halting symbols. It was as though he found in the chaos of the universe a new pattern, and were attempting clumsily, with anguish of soul, to set it down. I saw a tormented spirit striving for the release of expression.

I turned to him.

"I wonder if you haven't mistaken your medium," I said.

"What the hell do you mean?"

"I think you're trying to say something, I don't quite know what it is, but I'm not sure that the best way of saying it is by means of painting."

When I imagined that on seeing his pictures I should get a clue to the understanding of his strange character I was mistaken. They merely increased the astonishment with which he filled me. I was more at sea than ever. The only thing that seemed clear to me—and perhaps even this was fanciful—was that he was passionately striving for liberation from some power that held him. But what the power was and what line the liberation would take remained obscure. Each one of us is alone in the world. He is shut in a tower of brass, and can communicate with his fellows only by signs, and the signs have no common value, so that their sense is vague and uncertain. We seek pitifully to convey to others the

treasures of our heart, but they have not the power to accept them and so we go, lonely, side by side but not together, unable to know our fellows and unknown by them. We are like people living in a country whose language they know so little that, with all manner of beautiful and profound things to say, they are condemned to the banalities of the conversation manual. Their brain is seething with ideas, and they can only tell you that the umbrella of the gardener's aunt is in the house.

The final impression I received was of a prodigious effort to express some state of the soul, and in this effort, I fancied, must be sought the explanation of what so utterly perplexed me. It was evident that colours and forms had a significance for Strickland that was peculiar to himself. He was under an intolerable necessity to convey something that he felt, and he created them with that intention alone. He did not hesitate to simplify or to distort if he could get nearer to that unknown thing he sought. Facts were nothing to him, for beneath the mass of irrelevant incidents he looked for something significant to himself. It was as though he had become aware of the soul of the universe and were compelled to express it. Though these pictures confused and puzzled me, I could not be unmoved by the emotion that was patent in them; and, I knew not why, I felt in myself a feeling that with regard to Strickland was the last I had ever expected to experience. I felt an overwhelming compassion.

"I think I know now why you surrendered to your feeling for Blanche Stroeve," I said to him.

"Why?"

"I think your courage failed. The weakness of your body communicated itself to your soul. I do not know what infinite yearning possesses you, so that you are driven to a perilous, lonely search for some goal where you expect to find a final release from the spirit that torments you. I see you as the eternal pilgrim to some shrine that perhaps does not exist. I do not know to what inscrutable Nirvana you aim. Do you know yourself? Perhaps it is Truth and Freedom that you seek, and for a moment you thought that you might find release in Love. I think your tired soul sought rest in a woman's arms, and when you found no rest there you hated her. You had no pity for her, because you have no pity for yourself. And you killed her out of fear, because you trembled still at the danger you had barely escaped."

He smiled dryly and pulled his beard.

"You are a dreadful sentimentalist, my poor friend."

A week later I heard by chance that Strickland had gone to Marseilles. I never saw him again.

CHAPTER XLIII

LOOKING back, I realise that what I have written about Charles Strickland must seem very unsatisfactory. I have given incidents that came to my knowledge, but they remain obscure because I do not know the reasons that led to them. The strangest, Strickland's determination to become a painter, seems to be arbitrary; and though it must have had causes in the circumstances of his life, I am ignorant of them. From his own conversation I was able to glean nothing. If I were writing a novel, rather than narrating such facts as I know of a curious personality, I should have invented much to account for this change of heart. I think I should have shown a strong vocation in boyhood, crushed by the will of his father or sacrificed to the necessity of earning a living, I should have pictured him impatient of the restraints of life; and in the struggle between his passion for art and the duties of his station I could have aroused sympathy for him. I should so have made him a more imposing figure. Perhaps it would have been possible to see in him a new Prometheus. There was here, maybe, the opportunity for a modern version of the hero who for the good of mankind exposes himself to the agonies of the damned. It is always a moving subject.

On the other hand, I might have found his motives in the influence of the married relation. There are a dozen ways in which this might be managed. A latent gift might reveal itself on acquaintance with the painters and writers whose society his wife sought; or domestic incompatibility might turn him upon himself; a love affair might fan into bright flame a fire which I could have shown smouldering dimly in his heart. I think then I should have drawn Mrs. Strickland quite differently. I should have abandoned the facts and made her a nagging, tiresome woman, or else a bigoted one with no sympathy for the claims of the spirit. I should have made Strickland's marriage a long torment from which escape was the only possible issue. I think I should have emphasised his patience with the unsuitable mate, and the compassion which

made him unwilling to throw off the yoke that oppressed him. I should certainly have eliminated the children.

An effective story might also have been made by bringing him into contact with some old painter whom the pressure of want or the desire for commercial success had made false to the genius of his youth, and who, seeing in Strickland the possibilities which himself had wasted, influenced him to forsake all and follow the divine tyranny of art. I think there would have been something ironic in the picture of the successful old man, rich and honoured, living in another the life which he, though knowing it was the better part, had not had the strength to pursue.

The facts are much duller. Strickland, a boy fresh from school, went into a broker's office without any feeling of distaste. Until he married he led the ordinary life of his fellows, gambling mildly on the Exchange, interested to the extent of a sovereign or two on the result of the Derby or the Oxford and Cambridge Race. I think he boxed a little in his spare time. On his chimney-piece he had photographs of Mrs. Langtry and Mary Anderson. He read *Punch* and the *Sporting Times*. He went to dances in Hampstead.

It matters less that for so long I should have lost sight of him. The years during which he was struggling to acquire proficiency in a difficult art were monotonous, and I do not know that there was anything significant in the shifts to which he was put to earn enough money to keep him. An account of them would be an account of the things he had seen happen to other people. I do not think they had any effect on his own character. He must have acquired experiences which would form abundant material for a picaresque novel of modern Paris, but he remained aloof, and judging from his conversation there was nothing in those years that had made a particular impression on him. Perhaps when he went to Paris he was too old to fall a victim to the glamour of his environment. Strange as it may seem, he always appeared to me not only practical, but immensely matter-of-fact. I suppose his life during this period was romantic, but he certainly saw no romance in it. It may be that in order to realise the romance of life you must have something of the actor in you; and, capable of standing outside yourself, you must be able to watch your actions with an interest at once detached and absorbed. But no one was more single-minded than Strickland. I never knew anyone who was less self-conscious. But it is unfortunate that I can give no description of the arduous steps by which he reached such mastery over his

art as he ever acquired; for if I could show him undaunted by failure, by an unceasing effort of courage holding despair at bay, doggedly persistent in the face of self-doubt, which is the artist's bitterest enemy, I might excite some sympathy for a personality which, I am all too conscious, must appear singularly devoid of charm. But I have nothing to go on. I never once saw Strickland at work, nor do I know that anyone else did. He kept the secret of his struggles to himself. If in the loneliness of his studio he wrestled desperately with the Angel of the Lord he never allowed a soul to divine his anguish.

When I come to his connection with Blanche Stroeve I am exasperated by the fragmentariness of the facts at my disposal. To give my story coherence I should describe the progress of their tragic union, but I know nothing of the three months during which they lived together. I do not know how they got on or what they talked about. After all, there are twenty-four hours in the day, and the summits of emotion can only be reached at rare intervals. I can only imagine how they passed the rest of the time. While the light lasted and so long as Blanche's strength endured, I suppose that Strickland painted, and it must have irritated her when she saw him absorbed in his work. As a mistress she did not then exist for him, but only as a model; and then there were long hours in which they lived side by side in silence. It must have frightened her. When Strickland suggested that in her surrender to him there was a sense of triumph over Dirk Stroeve, because he had come to her help in her extremity, he opened the door to many a dark conjecture. I hope it was not true. It seems to me rather horrible. But who can fathom the subtleties of the human heart? Certainly not those who expect from it only decorous sentiments and normal emotions. When Blanche saw that, notwithstanding his moments of passion, Strickland remained aloof, she must have been filled with dismay, and even in those moments I surmise that she realised that to him she was not an individual, but an instrument of pleasure; he was a stranger still, and she tried to bind him to herself with pathetic arts. She strove to ensnare him with comfort and would not see that comfort meant nothing to him. She was at pains to get him the things to eat that he liked, and would not see that he was indifferent to food. She was afraid to leave him alone. She pursued him with attentions, and when his passion was dormant sought to excite it, for then, at least she had the illusion of holding him. Perhaps she knew with her intelligence

that the chains she forged only aroused his instinct of destruction, as the plate-glass window makes your fingers itch for half a brick; but her heart, incapable of reason, made her continue on a course she knew was fatal. She must have been very unhappy. But the blindness of love led her to believe what she wanted to be true, and her love was so great that it seemed impossible to her that it should not in return awake an equal love.

But my study of Strickland's character suffers from a graver defect than my ignorance of many facts. Because they were obvious and striking, I have written of his relations to women; and yet they were but an insignificant part of his life. It is an irony that they should so tragically have affected others. His real life consisted of dreams and of tremendously hard work.

Here lies the unreality of fiction. For in men, as a rule, love is but an episode which takes its place among the other affairs of the day, and the emphasis laid on it in novels gives it an importance which is untrue to life. There are few men to whom it is the most important thing in the world, and they are not very interesting ones; even women, with whom the subject is of paramount interest, have a contempt for them. They are flattered and excited by them, but have an uneasy feeling that they are poor creatures. But even during the brief intervals in which they are in love, men do other things which distract their mind: the trades by which they earn their living engage their attention; they are absorbed in sport; they can interest themselves in art. For the most part, they keep their various activities in various compartments, and they can pursue one to the temporary exclusion of the other. They have a faculty of concentration on that which occupies them at the moment, and it irks them if one encroaches on the other. As lovers, the difference between men and women is that women can love all day long, but men only at times.

With Strickland the sexual appetite took a very small place. It was unimportant. It was irksome. His soul aimed elsewhere. He had violent passions, and on occasion desire seized his body so that he was driven to an orgy of lust, but he hated the instincts that robbed him of his self-possession. I think, even, he hated the inevitable partner in his debauchery. When he had regained command over himself, he shuddered at the sight of the woman he had enjoyed. His thoughts floated then serenely in the empyrean, and he felt toward her the horror that perhaps the painted butterfly, hovering about the flowers, feels to the filthy chrysalis from

which it has triumphantly emerged. I suppose that art is a manifestation of the sexual instinct. It is the same emotion which is excited in the human heart by the sight of a lovely woman, the Bay of Naples under the yellow moon, and the *Entombment* of Titian. It is possible that Strickland hated the normal release of sex because it seemed to him brutal by comparison with the satisfaction of artistic creation. It seems strange even to myself, when I have described a man who was cruel, selfish, brutal and sensual, to say that he was a great idealist. The fact remains.

He lived more poorly than an artisan. He worked harder. He cared nothing for those things which with most people make life gracious and beautiful. He was indifferent to money. He cared nothing about fame. You cannot praise him because he resisted the temptation to make any of those compromises with the world which most of us yield to. He had no such temptation. It never entered his head that compromise was possible. He lived in Paris more lonely than an anchorite in the deserts of Thebes. He asked nothing from his fellows except that they should leave him alone. He was single-hearted in his aim, and to pursue it he was willing to sacrifice not only himself—many can do that—but others. He had a vision.

Strickland was an odious man, but I still think he was a great one.

CHAPTER XLIV

A CERTAIN importance attaches to the views on art of painters, and this is the natural place for me to set down what I know of Strickland's opinions of the great artists of the past. I am afraid I have very little worth noting. Strickland was not a conversationalist, and he had no gift for putting what he had to say in the striking phrase that the listener remembers. He had no wit. His humour, as will be seen if I have in any way succeeded in reproducing the manner of his conversation, was sardonic. His repartee was rude. He made one laugh sometimes by speaking the truth, but this is a form of humour which gains its force only by its unusualness; it would cease to amuse if it were commonly practised.

Strickland was not, I should say, a man of great intelligence, and his views on painting were by no means out of the ordinary. I never heard him speak of those whose work had a certain analogy

with his own—of Cézanne, for instance, or of Van Gogh; and I doubt very much if he had ever seen their pictures. He was not greatly interested in the Impressionists. Their technique impressed him, but I fancy that he thought their attitude commonplace. When Stroeve was holding forth at length on the excellence of Monet, he said: "I prefer Winterhalter." But I dare say he said it to annoy, and if he did he certainly succeeded.

I am disappointed that I cannot report any extravagances in his opinions on the old masters. There is so much in his character which is strange that I feel it would complete the picture if his views were outrageous. I feel the need to ascribe to him fantastic theories about his predecessors, and it is with a certain sense of disillusion that I confess he thought about them pretty much as does everybody else. I do not believe he knew El Greco. He had a great but somewhat impatient admiration for Velasquez. Chardin delighted him, and Rembrandt moved him to ecstasy. He described the impression that Rembrandt made on him with a coarseness I cannot repeat. The only painter that interested him who was at all unexpected was Brueghel the Elder. I knew very little about him at that time, and Strickland had no power to explain himself. I remember what he said about him because it was so unsatisfactory.

"He's all right," said Strickland. "I bet he found it hell to paint."

When later, in Vienna, I saw several of Peter Brueghel's pictures, I thought I understood why he had attracted Strickland's attention. Here, too, was a man with a vision of the world peculiar to himself. I made somewhat copious notes at the time, intending to write something about him, but I have lost them, and have now only the recollection of an emotion. He seemed to see his fellow-creatures grotesquely, and he was angry with them because they were grotesque; life was a confusion of ridiculous, sordid happenings, a fit subject for laughter, and yet it made him sorrowful to laugh. Brueghel gave me the impression of a man striving to express in one medium feelings more appropriate to expression in another, and it may be that it was the obscure consciousness of this that excited Strickland's sympathy. Perhaps both were trying to put down in paint ideas which were more suitable to literature.

Strickland at this time must have been nearly forty-seven.

CHAPTER XLV

I HAVE said already that but for the hazard of a journey to Tahiti I should doubtless never have written this book. It is thither that after many wanderings Charles Strickland came, and it is there that he painted the pictures on which his fame most securely rests. I suppose no artist achieves completely the realisation of the dream that obsesses him, and Strickland, harassed incessantly by his struggle with technique, managed, perhaps, less than others to express the vision that he saw with his mind's eye; but in Tahiti the circumstances were favourable to him; he found in his surroundings the accidents necessary for his inspiration to become effective, and his later pictures give at least a suggestion of what he sought. They offer the imagination something new and strange. It is as though in this far country his spirit, that had wandered disembodied, seeking a tenement, at last was able to clothe itself in flesh. To use the hackneyed phrase, here he found himself.

It would seem natural that my visit to this remote island should immediately revive my interest in Strickland, but the work I was engaged in occupied my attention to the exclusion of whatever was irrelevant, and it was not till I had been there some days that I even remembered his connection with it. After all, I had not seen him for fifteen years, and it was nine since he died. But I think my arrival at Tahiti would have driven out of my head matters of much more immediate importance to me, and even after a week I found it not easy to order myself soberly. I remember that on my first morning I awoke early, and when I came on to the terrace of the hotel no one was stirring. I wandered round to the kitchen, but it was locked, and on a bench outside it a native boy was sleeping. There seemed no chance of breakfast for some time, so I sauntered down to the water-front. The Chinamen were already busy in their shops. The sky had still the pallor of dawn, and there was a ghostly silence on the lagoon. Ten miles away the island of Murea, like some high fastness of the Holy Grail, guarded its mystery.

I did not altogether believe my eyes. The days that had passed since I left Wellington seemed extraordinary and unusual. Wellington is trim and neat and English; it reminds you of a seaport town on the South Coast. And for three days afterwards the sea was stormy. Grey clouds chased one another across the sky. Then the wind dropped, and the sea was calm and blue. The

Pacific is more desolate than other seas; its spaces seem more vast, and the most ordinary journey upon it has somehow the feeling of an adventure. The air you breathe is an elixir which prepares you for the unexpected. Nor is it vouchsafed to man in the flesh to know aught that more nearly suggests the approach to the golden realms of fancy than the approach to Tahiti. Murea, the sister isle, comes into view in rocky splendour, rising from the desert sea mysteriously, like the unsubstantial fabric of a magic wand. With its jagged outline it is like a Montserrat of the Pacific, and you may imagine that there Polynesian knights guard with strange rites mysteries unholy for men to know. The beauty of the island is unveiled as diminishing distance shows you in distincter shape its lovely peaks, but it keeps its secret as you sail by, and, darkly inviolable, seems to fold itself together in a stony, inaccessible grimness. It would not surprise you if, as you came near seeking for an opening in the reef, it vanished suddenly from your view, and nothing met your gaze but the blue loneliness of the Pacific.

Tahiti is a lofty green island, with deep folds of a darker green, in which you divine silent valleys; there is mystery in their sombre depths, down which murmur and splash cool streams, and you feel that in those umbrageous places life from immemorial times has been led according to immemorial ways. Even here is something sad and terrible. But the impression is fleeting, and serves only to give a greater acuteness to the enjoyment of the moment. It is like the sadness which you may see in the jester's eyes when a merry company is laughing at his sallies; his lips smile and his jokes are gayer because in the communion of laughter he finds himself more intolerably alone. For Tahiti is smiling and friendly; it is like a lovely woman graciously prodigal of her charm and beauty; and nothing can be more conciliatory than the entrance into the harbour at Papeete. The schooners moored to the quay are trim and neat, the little town along the bay is white and urbane, and the flamboyants, scarlet against the blue sky, flaunt their colour like a cry of passion. They are sensual with an unashamed violence that leaves you breathless. And the crowd that throngs the wharf as the steamer draws alongside is gay and debonair; it is a noisy, cheerful, gesticulating crowd. It is a sea of brown faces. You have an impression of coloured movement against the flaming blue of the sky. Everything is done with a great deal of bustle, the unloading of the baggage, the examination of the customs; and everyone seems to smile at you. It is very hot. The colour dazzles you.

CHAPTER XLVI

I HAD not been in Tahiti long before I met Captain Nichols. He came in one morning when I was having breakfast on the terrace of the hotel and introduced himself. He had heard that I was interested in Charles Strickland, and announced that he was come to have a talk about him. They are as fond of gossip in Tahiti as in an English village, and one or two enquiries I had made for pictures by Strickland had been quickly spread. I asked the stranger if he had breakfasted.

"Yes; I have my coffee early," he answered, "but I don't mind having a drop of whisky."

I called the Chinese boy.

"You don't think it's too early?" said the captain.

"You and your liver must decide that between you," I replied.

"I'm practically a teetotaler," he said, as he poured himself out a good half-tumbler of "Canadian Club".

When he smiled he showed broken and discoloured teeth. He was a very lean man, of no more than average height, with grey hair cut short and a stubby grey moustache. He had not shaved for a couple of days. His face was deeply lined, burned brown by long exposure to the sun, and he had a pair of small blue eyes which were astonishingly shifty. They moved quickly, following my smallest gesture, and they gave him the look of a very thorough rogue. But at the moment he was all heartiness and good-fellowship. He was dressed in a bedraggled suit of khaki, and his hands would have been all the better for a wash.

"I knew Strickland well," he said, as he leaned back in his chair and lit the cigar I had offered him. "It's through me he came out to the islands."

"Where did you meet him?" I asked.

"In Marseilles,"

"What were you doing there?"

He gave me an ingratiating smile.

"Well, I guess I was on the beach."

My friend's appearance suggested that he was now in the same predicament, and I prepared myself to cultivate an agreeable acquaintance. The society of beachcombers always repays the small pains you need be at to enjoy it. They are easy of approach and affable in conversation. They seldom put on airs, and the

offer of a drink is a sure way to their hearts. You need no laborious steps to enter upon familiarity with them, and you can earn not only their confidence, but their gratitude by turning an attentive ear to their discourse. They look upon conversation as the great pleasure of life, thereby proving the excellence of their civilisation, and for the most part they are entertaining talkers. The extent of their experience is pleasantly balanced by the fertility of their imagination. It cannot be said that they are without guile, but they have a tolerant respect for the law, when the law is supported by strength. It is hazardous to play poker with them, but their ingenuity adds a peculiar excitement to the best game in the world. I came to know Captain Nichols very well before I left Tahiti, and I am the richer for his acquaintance. I do not consider that the cigars and whisky he consumed at my expense (he always refused cocktails, since he was practically a teetotaler), and the few dollars, borrowed with a civil air of conferring a favour upon me, that passed from my pocket to his, were in any way equivalent to the entertainment he afforded me. I remained his debtor. I should be sorry if my conscience, insisting on a rigid attention to the matter in hand, forced me to dismiss him in a couple of lines.

I do not know why Captain Nichols first left England. It was a matter upon which he was reticent, and with persons of his kidney a direct question is never very discreet. He hinted at undeserved misfortune, and there is no doubt that he looked upon himself as the victim of injustice. My fancy played with the various forms of fraud and violence, and I agreed with him sympathetically when he remarked that the authorities in the old country were so damned technical. But it was nice to see that any unpleasantness he had endured in his native land had not impaired his ardent patriotism. He frequently declared that England was the finest country in the world, sir, and he felt a lively superiority over Americans, Colonials, Dagos, Dutchmen, and Kanakas.

But I do not think he was a happy man. He suffered from dyspepsia, and he might often be seen sucking a tablet of pepsin; in the morning his appetite was poor; but this affliction alone would hardly have impaired his spirits. He had a greater cause of discontent with life than this. Eight years before he had rashly married a wife. There are men whom a merciful Providence has undoubtedly ordained to a single life, but who from wilfulness or

through circumstances they could not cope with have flown in the face of its decrees. There is no object more deserving of pity than the married bachelor. Of such was Captain Nichols. I met his wife. She was a woman of twenty-eight, I should think, though of a type whose age is always doubtful; for she cannot have looked different when she was twenty, and at forty would look no older. She gave me an impression of extraordinary tightness. Her plain face with its narrow lips was tight, her skin was stretched tightly over her bones, her smile was tight, her hair was tight, her clothes were tight, and the white drill she wore had all the effect of black bombazine. I could not imagine why Captain Nichols had married her, and having married her why he had not deserted her. Perhaps he had, often, and his melancholy arose from the fact that he could never succeed. However far he went and in howsoever secret a place he hid himself, I felt sure that Mrs. Nichols, inexorable as fate and remorseless as conscience, would presently rejoin him. He could as little escape her as the cause can escape the effect.

The rogue, like the artist and perhaps the gentleman, belongs to no class. He is not embarrassed by the *sans gêne* of the hobo, nor put out of countenance by the etiquette of the prince. But Mrs. Nichols belonged to the well-defined class, of late become vocal, which is known as the lower-middle. Her father, in fact, was a policeman. I am certain that he was an efficient one. I do not know what her hold was on the captain, but I do not think it was love. I never heard her speak, but it may be that in private she had a copious conversation. At any rate, Captain Nichols was frightened to death of her. Sometimes, sitting with me on the terrace of the hotel, he would become conscious that she was walking in the road outside. She did not call him; she gave no sign that she was aware of his existence; she merely walked up and down composedly. Then a strange uneasiness would seize the captain; he would look at his watch and sigh.

"Well, I must be off," he said.

Neither wit nor whisky could detain him then. Yet he was a man who had faced undaunted hurricane and typhoon, and would not have hesitated to fight a dozen unarmed niggers with nothing but a revolver to help him. Sometimes, Mrs. Nichols would send her daughter, a pale-faced, sullen child of seven, to the hotel.

"Mother wants you," she said, in a whining tone.

"Very well, my dear," said Captain Nichols.

He rose to his feet at once, and accompanied his daughter along the road. I suppose it was a very pretty example of the triumph of spirit over matter, and so my digression has at least the advantage of a moral.

CHAPTER XLVII

I HAVE tried to put some connection into the various things Captain Nichols told me about Strickland, and I here set them down in the best order I can. They made one another's acquaintance during the latter part of the winter following my last meeting with Strickland in Paris. How he had passed the intervening months I do not know, but life must have been very hard, for Captain Nichols saw him first in the Asile de Nuit. There was a strike at Marseilles at the time, and Strickland, having come to the end of his resources, had apparently found it impossible to earn the small sum he needed to keep body and soul together.

The Asile de Nuit is a large stone building where pauper and vagabond may get a bed for a week, provided their papers are in order and they can persuade the friars in charge that they are working-men. Captain Nichols noticed Strickland for his size and his singular appearance among the crowd that waited for the doors to open; they waited listlessly, some walking to and fro, some leaning against the wall, and others seated on the kerb with their feet in the gutter; and when they filed into the office he heard the monk who read his papers address him in English. But he did not have a chance to speak to him, since, as he entered the common-room, a monk came in with a huge Bible in his arms, mounted a pulpit which was at the end of the room, and began the service which the wretched outcasts had to endure as the price of their lodging. He and Strickland were assigned to different rooms and when, thrown out of bed at five in the morning by a stalwart monk, he had made his bed and washed his face, Strickland had already disappeared. Captain Nichols wandered about the streets for an hour of bitter cold, and then made his way to the Place Victor Gélou, where the sailormen are wont to congregate. Dozing against the pedestal of a statue he saw Strickland again. He gave him a kick to awaken him.

"Come and have breakfast, mate," he said.

"Go to hell," answered Strickland.

I recognised my friend's limited vocabulary, and I prepared to regard Captain Nichols as a trustworthy witness.

"Busted?" asked the captain.

"Blast you," answered Strickland.

"Come along with me. I'll get you some breakfast."

After a moment's hesitation, Strickland scrambled to his feet, and together they went to the Bouchée de Pain, where the hungry are given a wedge of bread, which they must eat there and then, for it is forbidden to take it away; and then to the Cuillère de Soupe, where for a week, at eleven and four, you may get a bowl of thin, salt soup. The two buildings are placed far apart, so that only the starving should be tempted to make use of them. So they had breakfast, and so began the queer companionship of Charles Strickland and Captain Nichols.

They must have spent something like four months at Marseilles in one another's society. Their career was devoid of adventure, if by adventure you mean unexpected or thrilling incident, for their days were occupied in the pursuit of enough money to get a night's lodging and such food as would stay the pangs of hunger. But I wish I could give here the pictures, coloured and racy, which Captain Nichols's vivid narrative offered to the imagination. His account of their discoveries in the low life of a seaport town would have made a charming book, and in the various characters that came their way the student might easily have found matter for a very complete dictionary of rogues. But I must content myself with a few paragraphs. I received the impression of a life intense and brutal, savage, multi-coloured, and vivacious. It made the Marseilles that I knew, gesticulating and sunny, with its comfortable hotels and its restaurants crowded with the well-to-do, tame and commonplace. I envied men who had seen with their own eyes the sights that Captain Nichols described.

When the doors of the Asile de Nuit were closed to them, Strickland and Captain Nichols sought the hospitality of Tough Bill. This was the master of a sailors' boarding-house, a huge mulatto with a heavy fist, who gave the stranded mariner food and shelter till he found him a berth. They lived with him a month, sleeping with a dozen others, Swedes, negroes, Brazilians, on the floor of the two bare rooms in his house which he assigned to his charges; and every day they went with him to the Place Victor Gélou, whither came ships' captains in search of a man. He was

married to an American woman, obese and slatternly, fallen to this pass by heaven knows what process of degradation, and every day the boarders took it in turns to help her with the housework. Captain Nichols looked upon it as a smart piece of work on Strickland's part that he had got out of this by painting a portrait of Tough Bill. Tough Bill not only paid for the canvas, colours, and brushes, but gave Strickland a pound of smuggled tobacco into the bargain. For all I know, this picture may still adorn the parlour of the tumble-down little house somewhere near the Quai de la Joliette, and I suppose it could now be sold for fifteen hundred pounds. Strickland's idea was to ship on some vessel bound for Australia or New Zealand, and from there make his way to Samoa or Tahiti. I do not know how he had come upon the notion of going to the South Seas, though I remember that his imagination had long been haunted by an island, all green and sunny, encircled by a sea more blue than is found in Northern latitudes. I suppose that he clung to Captain Nichols because he was acquainted with those parts, and it was Captain Nichols who persuaded him that he would be more comfortable in Tahiti.

"You see, Tahiti's French," he explained to me. "And the French aren't so damned technical."

I thought I saw his point.

Strickland had no papers, but that was not a matter to disconcert Tough Bill when he saw a profit (he took the first month's wages of the sailor for whom he found a berth), and he provided Strickland with those of an English stoker who had providentially died on his hands. But both Captain Nichols and Strickland were bound East, and it chanced that the only opportunities for signing on were with ships sailing West. Twice Strickland refused a berth on tramps sailing for the United States, and once on a collier going to Newcastle. Tough Bill had no patience with an obstinacy which could only result in loss to himself, and on the last occasion he flung both Strickland and Captain Nichols out of his house without more ado. They found themselves once more adrift.

Tough Bill's fare was seldom extravagant, and you rose from his table almost as hungry as you sat down, but for some days they had good reason to regret it. They learned what hunger was. The *Cuillère de Soupe* and the *Asile de Nuit* were both closed to them, and their only sustenance was the wedge of bread which the *Bouchée de Pain* provided. They slept where they could, sometimes in an empty truck on a siding near the station, sometimes in

a cart behind a warehouse; but it was bitterly cold, and after an hour or two of uneasy dozing they would tramp the streets again. What they felt the lack of most bitterly was tobacco, and Captain Nichols, for his part, could not do without it; he took to hunting the "Can o' Beer" for cigarette-ends and the butt-ends of cigars which the promenaders of the night before had thrown away.

"I've tasted worse smoking mixtures in a pipe," he added, with a philosophic shrug of his shoulders, as he took a couple of cigars from the case I offered him, putting one in his mouth and the other in his pocket.

Now and then they made a bit of money. Sometimes a mail steamer would come in, and Captain Nichols, having scraped acquaintance with the time-keeper,* would succeed in getting the pair of them a job as stevedores. When it was an English boat, they would dodge into the forecastle and get a hearty breakfast from the crew. They took the risk of running against one of the ship's officers and being hustled down the gangway with the toe of a boot to speed their going.

"There's no harm in a kick in the hindquarters when your belly's full," said Captain Nichols, "and personally I never take it in bad part. An officer's got to think about discipline."

I had a lively picture of Captain Nichols flying headlong down a narrow gangway before the uplifted foot of an angry mate and, like a true Englishman, rejoicing in the spirit of the Mercantile Marine.

There were often odd jobs to be got about the fish-market. Once they each earned a franc by loading trucks with innumerable boxes of oranges that had been dumped down on the quay. One day they had a stroke of luck: one of the boarding-masters got a contract to paint a tramp that had come in from Madagascar round the Cape of Good Hope, and they spent several days on a plank hanging over the side, covering the rusty hull with paint. It was a situation that must have appealed to Strickland's sardonic humour. I asked Captain Nichols how he bore himself during these hardships.

"Never knew him say a cross word," answered the captain. "He'd be a bit surly sometimes, but when we hadn't had a bite since morning, and we hadn't even got the price of a lie-down at the Chink's, he'd be as lively as a cricket."

I was not surprised at this. Strickland was just the man to rise superior to circumstances, when they were such as to occasion

despondency in most; but whether this was due to equanimity of soul or to contradictoriness it would be difficult to say.

The Chink's Head was a name the beachcombers gave to a wretched inn off the Rue Bouterie, kept by a one-eyed Chinaman, where for six sous you could sleep in a cot and for three on the floor. Here they made friends with others in as desperate condition as themselves, and when they were penniless and the night was bitter cold, they were glad to borrow from anyone who had earned a stray franc during the day the price of a roof over their heads. They were not niggardly, these tramps, and he who had money did not hesitate to share it among the rest. They belonged to all the countries in the world, but this was no bar to good-fellowship; for they felt themselves freemen of a country whose frontiers include them all, the great country of Cockaigne.

"But I guess Strickland was an ugly customer when he was roused," said Captain Nichols, reflectively. "One day we ran into Tough Bill in the Place, and he asked Charlie for the papers he'd given him.

" 'You'd better come and take them if you want them,' says Charlie.

"He was a powerful fellow, Tough Bill, but he didn't quite like the look of Charlie, so he began cursing him. He called him pretty near every name he could lay hands on, and when Tough Bill began cursing it was worth listening to him. Well, Charlie stuck it for a bit, then he stepped forward and he just said: 'Get out, you bloody swine.' It wasn't so much what he said, but the way he said it. Tough Bill never spoke another word; you could see him go yellow, and he walked away as if he'd remembered he had a date."

Strickland, according to Captain Nichols, did not use exactly the words I have given, but since this book is meant for family reading I have thought it better, at the expense of truth, to put into his mouth expressions familiar to the domestic circle.

Now, Tough Bill was not the man to put up with humiliation at the hands of a common sailor. His power depended on his prestige, and first one, then another, of the sailors who lived in his house told them that he had sworn to do Strickland in.

One night Captain Nichols and Strickland were sitting in one of the bars of the Rue Bouterie. The Rue Bouterie is a narrow street of one-storeyed houses, each house consisting of but one room; they are like the booths in a crowded fair or the cages of animals in

a circus. At every door you see a woman. Some lean lazily against the side-posts, humming to themselves or calling to the passer-by in a raucous voice, and some listlessly read. They are French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, coloured; some are fat and some are thin; and under the thick paint on their faces, the heavy smears on their eyebrows, and the scarlet of their lips you see the lines of age and the scars of dissipation. Some wear black shifts and flesh-coloured stockings; some with curly hair, dyed yellow, are dressed like little girls in short muslin frocks. Through the open door you see a red-tiled floor, a large wooden bed, and on a deal table a ewer and a basin. A motley crowd saunters along the street—Lascars off a P. & O., blond Northmen from a Swedish barque, Japanese from a man-of-war, English sailors,* Spaniards, pleasant-looking fellows from a French cruiser, negroes off an American tramp. By day it is merely sordid, but at night, lit only by the lamps in the little huts, the street has a sinister beauty. The hideous lust that pervades the air is oppressive and horrible, and yet there is something mysterious in the sight which haunts and troubles you. You feel I know not what primitive force which repels and yet fascinates you. Here all the decencies of civilisation are swept away, and you feel that men are face to face with a sombre reality. There is an atmosphere that is at once intense and tragic.

In the bar in which Strickland and Nichols sat a mechanical piano was loudly grinding out dance music. Round the room people were sitting at tables, here half a dozen sailors uproariously drunk, there a group of soldiers; and in the middle, crowded together, couples were dancing. Bearded sailors with brown faces and large horny hands clasped their partners in a tight embrace. The women wore nothing but a shift. Now and then two sailors would get up and dance together. The noise was deafening. People were singing, shouting, laughing; and when a man gave a long kiss to the girl sitting on his knees, cat-calls from the English sailors increased the din. The air was heavy with the dust beaten up by the heavy boots of the men, and grey with smoke. It was very hot. Behind the bar was seated a woman nursing her baby. The waiter, an undersized youth with a flat, spotty face, hurried to and fro carrying a tray laden with glasses of beer.

In a little while Tough Bill, accompanied by two huge negroes, came in, and it was easy to see that he was already three parts drunk. He was looking for trouble. He lurched against a table at which three soldiers were sitting and knocked over a glass of beer.

There was an angry altercation, and the owner of the bar stepped forward and ordered Tough Bill to go. He was a hefty fellow, in the habit of standing no nonsense from his customers, and Tough Bill hesitated. The landlord was not a man he cared to tackle, for the police were on his side, and with an oath he turned on his heel. Suddenly he caught sight of Strickland. He rolled up to him. He did not speak. He gathered the spittle in his mouth and spat full in Strickland's face. Strickland seized his glass and flung it at him. The dancers stopped suddenly still. There was an instant of complete silence, but when Tough Bill threw himself on Strickland the lust of battle seized them all, and in a moment there was a confused scrummage. Tables were overturned, glasses crashed to the ground. There was a hellish row. The women scattered to the door and behind the bar. Passers-by surged in from the street. You heard curses in every tongue, the sound of blows, cries; and in the middle of the room a dozen men were fighting with all their might. On a sudden the police rushed in, and everyone who could made for the door. When the bar was more or less cleared, Tough Bill was lying insensible on the floor with a great gash in his head. Captain Nichols dragged Strickland, bleeding from a wound in his arm, his clothes in rags, into the street. His own face was covered with blood from a blow on the nose.

"I guess you'd better get out of Marseilles before Tough Bill comes out of hospital," he said to Strickland, when they had got back to the Chink's Head and were cleaning themselves.

"This beats cock-fighting," said Strickland.

I could see his sardonic smile.

Captain Nichols was anxious. He knew Tough Bill's vindictiveness. Strickland had downed the mulatto twice, and the mulatto, sober, was a man to be reckoned with. He would bide his time; stealthily. He would be in no hurry, but one night Strickland would get a knife-thrust in his back, and in a day or two the corpse of a nameless beachcomber would be fished out of the dirty water of the harbour. Nichols went next evening to Tough Bill's house and made enquiries. He was in hospital still, but his wife, who had been to see him, said he was swearing hard to kill Strickland when they let him out.

A week passed.

"That's what I always say," reflected Captain Nichols, "when you hurt a man, hurt him bad. It gives you a bit of time to look about and think what you'll do next."

Then Strickland had a bit of luck. A ship bound for Australia had sent to the Sailors' Home for a stoker in place of one who had thrown himself overboard off Gibraltar in an attack of delirium tremens.

"You double down to the harbour, my lad," said the captain to Strickland, "and sign on. You've got your papers."

Strickland set off at once, and that was the last Captain Nichols saw of him. The ship was only in port for six hours, and in the evening Captain Nichols watched the vanishing smoke from her funnels as she ploughed East through the wintry sea.

I have narrated all this as best I could, because I like the contrast of these episodes with the life that I had seen Strickland live in Ashley Gardens when he was occupied with stocks and shares; but I am aware that Captain Nichols was an outrageous liar, and I dare say there is not a word of truth in anything he told me. I should not be surprised to learn that he had never seen Strickland in his life, and owed his knowledge of Marseilles to the pages of a magazine.

CHAPTER XLVIII

It is here that I purposed to end my book. My first idea was to begin it with the account of Strickland's last years in Tahiti, and with his horrible death, and then to go back and relate what I knew of his beginnings. This I meant to do, not from wilfulness, but because I wished to leave Strickland setting out with I know not what fancies in his lonely soul for the unknown islands which fired his imagination. I liked the picture of him, starting at the age of forty-seven, when most men have already settled comfortably in a groove, for a new world. I saw him, the sea grey under the mistral and foam-flecked, watching the vanishing coast of France, which he was destined never to see again; and I thought there was something gallant in his bearing and dauntless in his soul. I wished so to end on a note of hope. It seemed to emphasise the unconquerable spirit of man. But I could not manage it. Somehow I could not get into my story, and after trying once or twice I had to give it up; I started from the beginning in the usual way, and made up my mind I could only tell what I knew of Strickland's life in the order in which I learnt the facts.

Those that I have now are fragmentary. I am in the position of a biologist who from a single bone must reconstruct not only the appearance of an extinct animal, but its habits. Strickland made no particular impression on the people who came in contact with him in Tahiti. To them he was no more than a beachcomber in constant need of money, remarkable only for the peculiarity that he painted pictures which seemed to them absurd; and it was not till he had been dead for some years, and agents came from the dealers in Paris and Berlin to look for any pictures which might still remain on the island, that they had any idea that among them had dwelt a man of consequence. They remembered then that they could have bought for a song canvases which now were worth large sums, and they could not forgive themselves for the opportunity which had escaped them. There was a Jewish trader called Cohen who had come by one of Strickland's pictures in a singular way. He was a little old Frenchman, with soft kind eyes and a pleasant smile, half trader and half seaman, who owned a cutter in which he wandered boldly among the Paumotus and the Marquesas, taking out trade goods and bringing back copra, shell, and pearls. I went to see him because I was told he had a large black pearl which he was willing to sell cheaply, and when I discovered that it was beyond my means I began to talk to him about Strickland. He had known him well.

"You see, I was interested in him because he was a painter," he told me. "We don't get many painters in the islands, and I was sorry for him because he was such a bad one. I gave him his first job. I had a plantation on the peninsula, and I wanted a white overseer. You never get any work out of the natives unless you have a white man over them. I said to him: 'You'll have plenty of time for painting, and you can earn a bit of money.' I knew he was starving, but I offered him good wages."

"I can't imagine that he was a very satisfactory overseer," I said, smiling.

"I made allowances. I have always had a sympathy for artists. It is in our blood, you know. But he only remained a few months. When he had enough money to buy paints and canvases he left me. The place had got hold of him by then, and he wanted to get away into the bush. But I continued to see him now and then. He would turn up in Papeete every few months and stay a little while; he'd get money out of someone or other and then disappear again. It was on one of these visits that he came to me and asked for the

loan of two hundred francs. He looked as if he hadn't had a meal for a week, and I hadn't the heart to refuse him. Of course, I never expected to see my money again. Well, a year later he came to see me once more, and he brought a picture with him. He did not mention the money he owed me, but he said: 'Here is a picture of your plantation that I've painted for you.' I looked at it. I did not know what to say, but of course I thanked him, and when he had gone away I showed it to my wife."

"What was it like?" I asked.

"Do not ask me. I could not make head or tail of it. I never saw such a thing in my life. 'What shall we do with it?' I said to my wife. 'We can never hang it up,' she said. 'People would laugh at us.' So she took it into an attic and put it away with all sorts of rubbish, for my wife can never throw anything away. It is her mania. Then, imagine to yourself, just before the war my brother wrote to me from Paris, and said: 'Do you know anything about an English painter who lived in Tahiti? It appears that he was a genius, and his pictures fetch large prices. See if you can lay your hands on anything and send it to me. There's money to be made.' So I said to my wife: 'What about that picture that Strickland gave me? Is it possible that it is still in the attic?' 'Without doubt,' she answered, 'for you know that I never throw anything away. It is my mania.' We went up to the attic, and there, among I know not what rubbish that had been gathered during the thirty years we have inhabited that house, was the picture. I looked at it again, and I said: 'Who would have thought that the overseer of my plantation on the peninsula, to whom I lent two hundred francs, had genius? Do you see anything in the picture?' 'No,' she said, 'it does not resemble the plantation and I have never seen coconuts with blue leaves; but they are mad in Paris, and it may be that your brother will be able to sell it for the two hundred francs you lent Strickland.' Well, we packed it up and we sent it to my brother. And at last I received a letter from him. What do you think he said? 'I received your picture,' he said, 'and I confess I thought it was a joke that you had played on me. I would not have given the cost of postage for the picture. I was half afraid to show it to the gentleman who had spoken to me about it. Imagine my surprise when he said it was a masterpiece, and offered me thirty thousand francs. I dare say he would have paid more, but frankly I was so taken aback that I lost my head; I accepted the offer before I was able to collect myself.' "

Then Monsieur Cohen said an admirable thing.

"I wish that poor Strickland had been still alive. I wonder what he would have said when I gave him twenty-nine thousand eight hundred francs for his picture."

CHAPTER XLIX

I LIVED at the Hôtel de la Fleur, and Mrs. Johnson, the proprietress, had a sad story to tell of lost opportunity. After Strickland's death certain of his effects were sold by auction in the market-place at Papeete, and she went to it herself because there was among the truck an American stove she wanted. She paid twenty-seven francs for it.

"There were a dozen pictures," she told me, "but they were unframed, and nobody wanted them. Some of them sold for as much as ten francs, but mostly they went for five or six. Just think, if I had bought them I should be a rich woman now."

But Tiaré Johnson would never under any circumstances have been rich. She could not keep money. The daughter of a native and an English sea-captain settled in Tahiti, when I knew her she was a woman of fifty, who looked older, and of enormous proportions. Tall and extremely stout, she would have been of imposing presence if the great good-nature of her face had not made it impossible for her to express anything but kindness. Her arms were like legs of mutton, her breasts like giant cabbages; her face, broad and fleshy, gave you an impression of almost indecent nakedness, and vast chin succeeded to vast chin. I do not know how many of them there were. They fell away voluminously into the capaciousness of her bosom. She was dressed usually in a pink Mother Hubbard, and she wore all day long a large straw hat. But when she let down her hair, which she did now and then, for she was vain of it, you saw that it was long and dark and curly; and her eyes had remained young and vivacious. Her laughter was the most catching I ever heard; it would begin, a low peal in her throat, and would grow louder and louder till her whole vast body shook. She loved three things—a joke, a glass of wine, and a handsome man. To have known her is a privilege.

She was the best cook on the island, and she adored good food. From morning till night you saw her sitting on a low chair in the

kitchen, surrounded by a Chinese cook and two or three native girls, giving her orders, chatting sociably with all and sundry, and tasting the savoury messes she devised. When she wished to do honour to a friend she cooked the dinner with her own hands. Hospitality was a passion with her, and there was no one on the island who need go without a dinner when there was anything to eat at the Hôtel de la Fleur. She never turned her customers out of her house because they did not pay their bills. She always hoped they would pay when they could. There was one man there who had fallen on adversity, and to him she had given board and lodging for several months. When the Chinese laundryman refused to wash for him without payment she had sent his things to be washed with hers. She could not allow the poor fellow to go about in a dirty shirt, she said, and since he was a man, and men must smoke, she gave him a franc a day for cigarettes. She used him with the same affability as those of her clients who paid their bills once a week.

Age and obesity had made her inapt for love, but she took a keen interest in the amatory affairs of the young. She looked upon venery as the natural occupation for men and women, and was ever ready with precept and example from her own wide experience.

"I was not fifteen when my father found that I had a lover," she said. "He was third mate on the *Tropic Bird*. A good-looking boy."

She sighed a little. They say a woman always remembers her first lover with affection; but perhaps she does not always remember him.

"My father was a sensible man."

"What did he do?" I asked.

"He thrashed me within an inch of my life, and then he made me marry Captain Johnson. I did not mind. He was older, of course, but he was good-looking too."

Tiaré—her father had called her by the name of the white, scented flower which, they tell you, if you have once smelt, will always draw you back to Tahiti in the end, however far you may have roamed—Tiaré remembered Strickland very well.

"He used to come here sometimes, and I used to see him walking about Papeete. I was sorry for him, he was so thin, and he never had any money. When I heard he was in town, I used to send a boy to find him and make him come to dinner with me. I got him a job once or twice, but he couldn't stick to

anything. After a little while he wanted to get back to the bush, and one morning he would be gone."

Strickland reached Tahiti about six months after he left Marseilles. He worked his passage on a sailing vessel that was making the trip from Auckland to San Francisco, and he arrived with a box of paints, an easel, and a dozen canvases. He had a few pounds in his pocket, for he had found work in Sydney, and he took a small room in a native house outside the town. I think the moment he reached Tahiti he felt himself at home. Tiaré told me that he said to her once:

"I'd been scrubbing the deck, and all at once a chap said to me: 'Why, there it is.' And I looked up and I saw the outline of the island. I knew right away that there was the place I'd been looking for all my life. Then we came near, and I seemed to recognise it. Sometimes when I walk about it all seems familiar. I could swear I've lived here before."

"Sometimes it takes them like that," said Tiaré. "I've known men come on shore for a few hours while their ship was taking in cargo, and never go back. And I've known men who came here to be in an office for a year, and they cursed the place, and when they went away they took their dying oath they'd hang themselves before they came back again, and in six months you'd see them land once more, and they'd tell you they couldn't live anywhere else."

CHAPTER L

I HAVE an idea that some men are born out of their due place. Accident has cast them amid certain surroundings, but they have always a nostalgia for a home they know not. They are strangers in their birthplace, and the leafy lanes they have known from childhood, or the populous streets in which they have played, remain but a place of passage. They may spend their whole lives aliens among their kindred and remain aloof among the only scenes they have ever known. Perhaps it is this sense of strangeness that sends men far and wide in the search for something permanent, to which they may attach themselves. Perhaps some deep-rooted atavism urges the wanderer back to lands which his ancestors left in the dim beginnings of history. Sometimes a man hits upon a place to which he mysteriously feels that he belongs.

Here is the home he sought, and he will settle amid scenes that he has never seen before, among men he has never known, as though they were familiar to him from his birth. Here at last he finds rest.

I told Tiaré the story of a man I had known at St. Thomas's Hospital. He was a Jew named Abraham, a blond, rather stout young man, shy and very unassuming; but he had remarkable gifts. He entered the hospital with a scholarship and during the five years of the curriculum gained every prize that was open to him. He was made house-physician and house-surgeon. His brilliance was allowed by all. Finally he was elected to a position on the staff, and his career was assured. So far as human things can be predicted, it was certain that he would rise to the greatest heights in his profession. Honours and wealth awaited him. Before he entered upon his new duties he wished to take a holiday, and, having no private means, he went as surgeon on a tramp steamer to the Levant. It did not generally carry a doctor, but one of the senior surgeons at the hospital knew a director of the line, and Abraham was taken as a favour.

In a few weeks the authorities received his resignation of the coveted position on the staff. It created profound astonishment, and wild rumours were current. Whenever a man does anything unexpected, his fellows ascribe it to the most discreditable motives. But there was a man ready to step into Abraham's shoes, and Abraham was forgotten. Nothing more was heard of him. He vanished.

It was perhaps ten years later that one morning on board ship, about to land at Alexandria, I was bidden to line up with the other passengers for the doctor's examination. The doctor was a stout man in shabby clothes, and when he took off his hat I noticed that he was very bald. I had an idea that I had seen him before. Suddenly I remembered.

"Abraham," I said.

He turned to me with a puzzled look, and then, recognising me, seized my hand. After expressions of surprise on either side, hearing that I meant to spend the night in Alexandria, he asked me to dine with him at the English Club. When we met again I declared my astonishment at finding him there. It was a very modest position that he occupied, and there was about him an air of straitened circumstance. Then he told me his story. When he set out on his holiday in the Mediterranean he had every intention

of returning to London and his appointment at St. Thomas's. One morning the tramp docked at Alexandria, and from the deck he looked at the city, white in the sunlight, and the crowd on the wharf; he saw the natives in their shabby gabardines, the blacks from the Soudan, the noisy throng of Greeks and Italians, the grave Turks in tarbooshes, the sunshine and the blue sky; and something happened to him. He could not describe it. It was like a thunder-clap, he said, and then, dissatisfied with this, he said it was like a revelation. Something seemed to twist his heart, and suddenly he felt an exultation, a sense of wonderful freedom. He felt himself at home, and he made up his mind there and then, in a minute, that he would live the rest of his life in Alexandria. He had no great difficulty in leaving the ship, and in twenty-four hours, with all his belongings, he was on shore.

"The captain must have thought you as mad as a hatter," I smiled.

"I didn't care what anybody thought. It wasn't I that acted, but something stronger within me. I thought I would go to a little Greek hotel, while I looked about, and I felt I knew where to find one. And do you know, I walked straight there, and when I saw it I recognised it at once."

"Had you been to Alexandria before?" "

"No; I'd never been out of England in my life."

Presently he entered the Government service, and there he had been ever since.

"Have you never regretted it?"

"Never, not for a minute. I earn just enough to live upon, and I'm satisfied. I ask nothing more than to remain as I am till I die. I've had a wonderful life."

I left Alexandria next day, and I forgot about Abraham till a little while ago, when I was dining with another old friend in the profession, Alec Carmichael, who was in England on short leave. I ran across him in the street and congratulated him on the knighthood with which his eminent services during the war had been rewarded. We arranged to spend an evening together for old time's sake, and when I agreed to dine with him he proposed that he should ask nobody else, so that we could chat without interruption. He had a beautiful old house in Queen Anne Street, and being a man of taste he had furnished it admirably. On the walls of the dining-room I saw a charming Bellotto, and there was a pair of Zoffanys that I envied. When his wife, a tall, lovely creature in

cloth of gold, had left us, I remarked laughingly on the change in his present circumstances from those when we had both been medical students. We had looked upon it then as an extravagance to dine in a shabby Italian restaurant in the Westminster Bridge Road. Now Alec Carmichael was on the staff of half a dozen hospitals. I should think he earned ten thousand a year, and his knighthood was but the first of the honours which must inevitably fall to his lot.

"I've done pretty well," he said, "but the strange thing is that I owe it all to one piece of luck."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, do you remember Abraham? He was the man who had the future. When we were students he beat me all along the line. He got the prizes and the scholarships that I went in for. I always played second fiddle to him. If he'd kept on he'd be in the position I'm in now. That man had a genius for surgery. No one had a look-in with him. When he was appointed Registrar at Thomas's I hadn't a chance of getting on the staff. I should have had to become a G.P., and you know what likelihood there is for a G.P. ever to get out of the common rut. But Abraham fell out, and I got the job. That gave me my opportunity."

"I dare say that's true."

"It was just luck. I suppose there was some kink in Abraham. Poor devil, he's gone to the dogs altogether. He's got some twopenny-halfpenny job in the medical at Alexandria—sanitary officer or something like that. I'm told he lives with an ugly old Greek woman and has half a dozen scrofulous kids. The fact is, I suppose, that it's not enough to have brains. The thing that counts is character. Abraham hadn't got character."

Character? I should have thought it needed a good deal of character to throw up a career after half an hour's meditation, because you saw in another way of living a more intense significance. And it required still more character never to regret the sudden step. But I said nothing, and Alec Carmichael proceeded reflectively:

"Of course it would be hypocritical for me to pretend that I regret what Abraham did. After all, I've scored by it." He puffed luxuriously at the long Corona he was smoking. "But if I weren't personally concerned I should be sorry at the waste. It seems a rotten thing that a man should make such a hash of life."

I wondered if Abraham really had made a hash of life. Is to do

what you most want, to live under the conditions that please you, in peace with yourself, to make a hash of life; and is it success to be an eminent surgeon with ten thousand a year and a beautiful wife? I suppose it depends on what meaning you attach to life, the claim which you acknowledge to society, and the claim of the individual. But again I held my tongue, for who am I to argue with a knight?

CHAPTER LI

TIARÉ, when I told her this story, praised my prudence, and for a few minutes we worked in silence, for we were shelling peas. Then her eyes, always alert for the affairs of her kitchen, fell on some action of the Chinese cook which aroused her violent disapproval. She turned on him with a torrent of abuse. The Chink was not backward to defend himself, and a very lively quarrel ensued. They spoke in the native language, of which I had learnt but half a dozen words, and it sounded as though the world would shortly come to an end; but presently peace was restored and Tiaré gave the cook a cigarette. They both smoked comfortably.

"Do you know, it was I who found him his wife?" said Tiaré suddenly, with a smile that spread all over her immense face.

"The cook?"

"No, Strickland."

"But he had one already."

"That is what he said, but I told him she was in England, and England is at the other end of the world."

"True," I replied.

"He would come to Papeete every two or three months, when he wanted paints or tobacco or money, and then he would wander about like a lost dog. I was sorry for him. I had a girl here then called Ata to do the rooms; she was some sort of a relation of mine, and her father and mother were dead, so I had her to live with me. Strickland used to come here now and then to have a square meal or to play chess with one of the boys. I noticed that she looked at him when he came, and I asked her if she liked him. She said she liked him well enough. You know what these girls are; they're always pleased to go with a white man."

"Was she a native?" I asked.

"Yes; she hadn't a drop of white blood in her. Well, after I'd talked to her I sent for Strickland, and I said to him: 'Strickland, it's time for you to settle down. A man of your age shouldn't go playing about with the girls down at the front. They're bad lots, and you'll come to no good with them. You've got no money, and you can never keep a job for more than a month or two. No one will employ you now. You say you can always live in the bush with one or other of the natives, and they're glad to have you because you're a white man, but it's not decent for a white man. Now, listen to me, Strickland.' "

Tiaré mingled French with English in her conversation, for she used both languages with equal facility. She spoke them with a singing accent which was not displeasing. You felt that a bird would speak in these tones if it could speak English.

" 'Now, what do you say to marrying Ata? She's a good girl and she's only seventeen. She's never been promiscuous like some of these girls—a captain or a first mate, yes, but she's never been touched by a native. *Elle se respecte, vois-tu?* The purser of the *Oahu* told me last journey that he hadn't met a nicer girl in the islands. It's time she settled down too, and besides, the captains and the first mates like a change now and then. I don't keep my girls too long. She has a bit of property down by Taravao, just before you come to the peninsula, and with copra at the price it is now you could live quite comfortably. There's a house, and you'd have all the time you wanted for your painting. What do you say to that?' "

Tiaré paused to take breath.

"It was then he told me of his wife in England. 'My poor Strickland,' I said to him, 'they've all got a wife somewhere; that is generally why they come to the islands. Ata is a sensible girl, and she doesn't expect any ceremony before the Mayor. She's a Protestant, and you know they don't look upon these things like the Catholics.'

"Then he said: 'But what does Ata say to it?' 'It appears that she has a *béguin* for you,' I said. 'She's willing if you are. Shall I call her?' He chuckled in a funny, dry way he had, and I called her. She knew what I was talking about, the hussy, and I saw her out of the corner of my eyes listening with all her ears, while she pretended to iron a blouse that she had been washing for me. She came. She was laughing, but I could see

that she was a little shy, and Strickland looked at her without speaking."

"Was she pretty?" I asked.

"Not bad. But you must have seen pictures of her. He painted her over and over again, sometimes with a *pareo* on and sometimes with nothing at all. Yes, she was pretty enough. And she knew how to cook. I taught her myself. I saw Strickland was thinking of it, so I said to him: 'I've given her good wages and she's saved them, and the captains and the first mates she's known have given her a little something now and then. She's saved several hundred francs.'

"He pulled his great red beard and smiled.

" 'Well, Ata,' he said, 'do you fancy me for a husband?'

"She did not say anything, but just giggled.

" 'But I tell you, my poor Strickland, the girl has a *béguin* for you,' I said.

" 'I shall beat you,' he said, looking at her.

" 'How else should I know you loved me?' she answered."

Tiaré broke off her narrative and addressed herself to me reflectively.

"My first husband, Captain Johnson, used to thrash me regularly. He was a man. He was handsome, six foot three, and when he was drunk there was no holding him. I would be black and blue all over for days at a time. Oh, I cried when he died. I thought I should never get over it. But it wasn't till I married George Rainey that I knew what I'd lost. You can never tell what a man is like till you live with him. I've never been so deceived in a man as I was in George Rainey. He was a fine, upstanding fellow too. He was nearly as tall as Captain Johnson, and he looked strong enough. But it was all on the surface. He never drank. He never raised his hand to me. He might have been a missionary. I made love with the officers of every ship that touched at the island, and George Rainey never saw anything. At last I was disgusted with him, and I got a divorce. What was the good of a husband like that? It's a terrible thing the way some men treat women."

I condoled with Tiaré, and remarked feelingly that men were deceivers ever, then asked her to go on with her story of Strickland.

" 'Well,' I said to him, 'there's no hurry about it. Take your time and think it over. Ata has a very nice room in the annexe. Live with her for a month, and see how you like her. You can

have your meals here. And at the end of a month, if you decide you want to marry her, you can just go and settle down on her property.'

"Well, he agreed to that. Ata continued to do the housework, and I gave him his meals as I said I would. I taught Ata how to make one or two dishes I knew he was fond of. He did not paint much. He wandered about the hills and bathed in the stream. And he sat about the front looking at the lagoon, and at sunset he would go down and look at Murea. He used to go fishing on the reef. He loved to moon about the harbour talking to the natives. He was a nice quiet fellow. And every evening after dinner he would go down to the annexe with Ata. I saw he was longing to get away to the bush, and at the end of the month I asked him what he intended to do. He said if Ata was willing to go, he was willing to go with her. So I gave them a wedding dinner. I cooked it with my own hands. I gave them a pea soup and lobster *à la portugaise*, and a curry, and a coconut salad—you've never had one of my coconut salads, have you? I must make you one before you go—and then I made them an ice. We had all the champagne we could drink and liqueurs to follow. Oh, I'd made up my mind to do things well. And afterwards we danced in the drawing-room. I was not so fat then, and I always loved dancing."

The drawing-room at the Hôtel de la Fleur was a small room, with a cottage piano, and a suite of mahogany furniture, covered in stamped velvet, neatly arranged round the walls. On round tables were photograph albums, and on the walls enlarged photographs of Tiaré and her first husband, Captain Johnson. Still, though Tiaré was old and fat, on occasion we rolled back the Brussels carpet, brought in the maids and one or two friends of Tiaré's, and danced, though now to the wheezy music of a gramophone. On the veranda the air was scented with the heavy perfume of the tiaré, and overhead the Southern Cross shone in a cloudless sky.

Tiaré smiled indulgently as she remembered the gaiety of a time long passed.

"We kept it up till three, and when we went to bed I don't think anyone was very sober. I had told them they could have my trap to take them as far as the road went, because after that they had a long walk. Ata's property was right away in a fold of the mountain. They started at dawn, and the boy I sent with them didn't come back till next day.

"Yes, that's how Strickland was married."

CHAPTER LII

I SUPPOSE the next three years were the happiest of Strickland's life. Ata's house stood about eight kilometres from the road that runs round the island, and you went to it along a winding pathway shaded by the luxuriant trees of the tropics. It was a bungalow of unpainted wood, consisting of two small rooms, and outside was a small shed that served as a kitchen. There was no furniture except the mats they used as beds and a rocking-chair, which stood on the veranda. Bananas with their great ragged leaves, like the tattered habiliments of an empress in adversity, grew close up to the house. There was a tree just behind which bore alligator-pears, and all about were the coconuts which gave the land its revenue. Ata's father had planted crotons round his property, and they grew in coloured profusion, gay and brilliant; they fenced the land with flame. A mango grew in front of the house, and at the edge of the clearing were two flamboyants, twin trees, that challenged the gold of the coconuts with their scarlet flowers.

Here Strickland lived, coming seldom to Papeete, on the produce of the land. There was a little stream that ran not far away, in which he bathed, and down this on occasion would come a shoal of fish. Then the natives would assemble with spears, and with much shouting would transfix the great startled things as they hurried down to the sea. Sometimes Strickland would go down to the reef, and come back with a basket of small, coloured fish that Ata would fry in coconut oil, or with a lobster; and sometimes she would make a savoury dish of the great land-crabs that scuttled away under your feet. Up the mountain were wild-orange trees, and now and then Ata would go with two or three women from the village and return laden with the green, sweet, luscious fruit. Then the coconuts would be ripe for picking, and her cousins (like all the natives, Ata had a host of relatives) would swarm up the trees and throw down the big ripe nuts. They split them open and put them in the sun to dry. Then they cut out the copra and put it into sacks, and the women would carry it down to the trader at the village by the lagoon, and he would give in exchange for it rice and soap and tinned meat and a little money. Sometimes there would be a feast in the neighbourhood, and a pig would be killed. Then they would go and eat themselves sick, and dance, and sing hymns.

But the house was a long way from the village, and the Tahitians are lazy. They love to travel and they love to gossip, but they do not care to walk, and for weeks at a time Strickland and Ata lived alone. He painted and he read, and in the evening, when it was dark, they sat together on the veranda, smoking and looking at the night. Then Ata had a baby, and the old woman who came up to help her through her trouble stayed on. Presently the granddaughter of the old woman came to stay with her, and then a youth appeared—none quite knew wherefrom or to whom he belonged—but he settled down with them in a happy-go-lucky way, and they all lived together.

CHAPTER LIII

"*Tenez, voilà le Capitaine Brunot*," said Tiaré, one day when I was fitting together what she could tell me of Strickland. "He knew Strickland well; he visited him at his house."

I saw a middle-aged Frenchman with a big black beard, streaked with grey, a sunburned face, and large, shining eyes. He was dressed in a neat suit of ducks. I had noticed him at luncheon, and Ah Lin, the Chinese boy, told me he had come from the Paumotu on the boat that had that day arrived. Tiaré introduced me to him, and he handed me his card, a large card on which was printed *René Brunot*, and underneath, *Capitaine au Long Cours*. We were sitting on a little veranda outside the kitchen, and Tiaré was cutting out a dress that she was making for one of the girls about the house. He sat down with us.

"Yes; I knew Strickland well," he said. "I am very fond of chess, and he was always glad of a game. I come to Tahiti three or four times a year for my business, and when he was at Papeete he would come here and we would play. When he married"—Captain Brunot smiled and shrugged his shoulders—"enfin, when he went to live with the girl that Tiaré gave him, he asked me to go and see him. I was one of the guests at the wedding feast." He looked at Tiaré, and they both laughed. "He did not come much to Papeete after that, and about a year later it chanced that I had to go to that part of the island for I forget what business, and when I had finished it I said to myself: '*Voyons*, why should I not go and see that poor Strickland?' I asked one or two natives if they knew

anything about him, and I discovered that he lived not more than five kilometres from where I was. So I went. I shall never forget the impression my visit made on me. I live on an atoll, a low island, it is a strip of land surrounding a lagoon, and its beauty is the beauty of the sea and sky, and the varied colour of the lagoon, and the grace of the coconut trees; but the place where Strickland lived had the beauty of the Garden of Eden. Ah, I wish I could make you see the enchantment of that spot, a corner hidden away from all the world, with the blue sky overhead and the rich, luxuriant trees. It was a feast of colour. And it was fragrant and cool. Words cannot describe that paradise. And here he lived, unmindful of the world and by the world forgotten. I suppose to European eyes it would have seemed astonishingly sordid. The house was dilapidated and none too clean. When I approached I saw three or four natives lying on the veranda. You know how natives love to herd together. There was a young man lying full length, smoking a cigarette, and he wore nothing but a *pareo*."

The *pareo* is a long strip of trade cotton, red or blue, stamped with a white pattern. It is worn round the waist and hangs to the knees.

"A girl of fifteen, perhaps, was plaiting pandanus-leaf to make a hat, and an old woman was sitting on her haunches smoking a pipe. Then I saw Ata. She was suckling a new-born child, and another child, stark naked, was playing at her feet. When she saw me she called out to Strickland, and he came to the door. He, too, wore nothing but a *pareo*. He was an extraordinary figure, with his red beard and matted hair, and his great hairy chest. His feet were horny and scarred, so that I knew he went always bare-foot. He had gone native with a vengeance. He seemed pleased to see me, and told Ata to kill a chicken for our dinner. He took me into the house to show me the picture he was at work on when I came in. In one corner of the room was the bed, and in the middle was an easel with the canvas upon it. Because I was sorry for him, I had bought a couple of his pictures for small sums, and I had sent others to friends of mine in France. And though I had bought them out of compassion, after living with them I began to like them. Indeed, I found a strange beauty in them. Everyone thought I was mad, but it turns out that I was right. I was his first admirer in the islands."

He smiled maliciously at Tiaré, and with lamentations she told us again the story of how at the sale of Strickland's effects she had

neglected the pictures, but bought an American stove for twenty-seven francs.

"Have you the pictures still?" I asked.

"Yes; I am keeping them till my daughter is of marriageable age, and then I shall sell them. They will be her *dot*."

Then he went on with the account of his visit to Strickland.

"I shall never forget the evening I spent with him. I had not intended to stay more than an hour, but he insisted that I should spend the night. I hesitated, for I confess I did not much like the look of the mats on which he proposed that I should sleep; but I shrugged my shoulders. When I was building my house in the Paumotus I had slept out for weeks on a harder bed than that, with nothing to shelter me but wild shrubs; and as for vermin, my tough skin should be proof against their malice.

"We went down to the stream to bathe while Ata was preparing the dinner, and after we had eaten it we sat on the veranda. We smoked and chatted. The young man had a concertina, and he played the tunes popular on the music-halls a dozen years before. They sounded strangely in the tropical night thousands of miles from civilisation. I asked Strickland if it did not irk him to live in that promiscuity. No, he said; he liked to have his models under his hand. Presently, after loud yawning, the natives went away to sleep, and Strickland and I were left alone. I cannot describe to you the intense silence of the night. On my island in the Paumotus there is never at night the complete stillness that there was here. There is the rustle of the myriad animals on the beach, all the little shelled things that crawl about ceaselessly, and there is the noisy scurrying of the land-crabs. Now and then in the lagoon you hear the leaping of a fish, and sometimes a hurried noisy splashing as a brown shark sends all the other fish scampering for their lives. And above all, ceaseless like time, is the dull roar of the breakers on the reef. But here there was not a sound, and the air was scented with the white flowers of the night. It was a night so beautiful that your soul seemed hardly able to bear the prison of the body. You felt that it was ready to be wafted away on the immaterial air, and death bore all the aspect of a beloved friend."

Tiaré sighed.

"Ah, I wish I were fifteen again."

Then she caught sight of a cat trying to get at a dish of prawns on the kitchen table, and with a dexterous gesture and a lively volley of abuse flung a book at its scampering tail.

"I asked him if he was happy with Ata.

" 'She leaves me alone,' he said. 'She cooks my food and looks after her babies. She does what I tell her. She gives me what I want from a woman.'

" 'And do you never regret Europe? Do you not yearn sometimes for the light of the streets in Paris or London, the companionship of your friends and equals, *que sais-je?* for theatres and newspapers, and the rumble of omnibuses on the cobbled pavements?'

"For a long time he was silent. Then he said:

" 'I shall stay here till I die.'

" 'But are you never bored or lonely?' I asked.

"He chuckled.

" 'Mon pauvre ami,' he said. 'It is evident that you do not know what it is to be an artist.' "

Capitaine Brunot turned to me with a gentle smile, and there was a wonderful look in his dark, kind eyes.

"He did me an injustice, for I too know what it is to have dreams. I have my visions too. In my way I also am an artist."

We were all silent for a while, and Tiaré fished out of her capacious pocket a handful of cigarettes. She handed one to each of us, and we all three smoked. At last she said:

"Since *ce monsieur* is interested in Strickland, why do you not take him to see Dr. Coutras? He can tell him something about his illness and death."

"Volontiers," said the captain, looking at me.

I thanked him, and he looked at his watch.

"It is past six o'clock. We should find him at home if you care to come now."

I got up without further ado, and we walked along the road that led to the doctor's house. He lived out of the town, but the Hôtel de la Fleur was on the edge of it, and we were quickly in the country. The broad road was shaded by pepper-trees, and on each side were the plantations, coconut and vanilla. The pirate birds were screeching among the leaves of the palms. We came to a stone bridge over a shallow river, and we stopped for a few minutes to see the native boys bathing. They chased one another with shrill cries and laughter, and their bodies, brown and wet, gleamed in the sunlight.

CHAPTER LIV

As we walked along I reflected on a circumstance which all that I had lately heard about Strickland forced on my attention. Here, on this remote island, he seemed to have aroused none of the detestation with which he was regarded at home, but compassion rather; and his vagaries were accepted with tolerance. To these people, native and European, he was a queer fish, and they took him for granted; the world was full of odd persons, who did odd things; and perhaps they knew that a man is not what he wants to be, but what he must be. In England and France he was the square peg in the round hole, but here the holes were any sort of shape, and no sort of peg was quite amiss. I do not think he was any gentler here, less selfish or less brutal, but the circumstances were more favourable. If he had spent his life amid these surroundings he might have passed for no worse a man than another. He received here what he neither expected nor wanted among his own people—sympathy.

I tried to tell Captain Brunot something of the astonishment with which this filled me, and for a little while he did not answer.

"It is not strange that I, at all events, should have had sympathy for him," he said at last, "for, though perhaps neither of us knew it, we were both aiming at the same thing."

"What on earth can it be that two people so dissimilar as you and Strickland could aim at?" I asked, smiling.

"Beauty."

"A large order," I murmured.

"Do you know how men can be so obsessed by love that they are deaf and blind to everything else in the world? They are as little their own masters as the slaves chained to the benches of a galley. The passion that held Strickland in bondage was no less tyrannical than love."

"How strange that you should say that!" I answered. "For long ago I had the idea that he was possessed of a devil."

"And the passion that held Strickland was a passion to create beauty. It gave him no peace. It urged him hither and thither. He was eternally a pilgrim, haunted by a divine nostalgia, and the demon within him was ruthless. There are men whose desire for truth is so great that to attain it they will shatter the very foundation of their world. Of such was Strickland, only beauty

with him took the place of truth. I could only feel for him profound compassion."

"That is strange also. A man whom he had deeply wronged told me that he felt a great pity for him." I was silent for a moment. "I wonder if there you have found the explanation of a character which has always seemed to me inexplicable. How did you hit on it?"

He turned to me with a smile.

"Did I not tell you that I, too, in my way was an artist? I realised in myself the same desire as animated him. But whereas his medium was paint, mine has been life."

Then Captain Brunot told me a story which I must repeat, since, if only by way of contrast, it adds something to my impression of Strickland. It has also to my mind a beauty of its own.

Captain Brunot was a Breton, and had been in the French Navy. He left it on his marriage, and settled down on a small property he had near Quimper to live for the rest of his days in peace; but the failure of an attorney left him suddenly penniless, and neither he nor his wife was willing to live in penury where they had enjoyed consideration. During his seafaring days he had cruised the South Seas, and he determined now to seek his fortune there. He spent some months in Papeete to make his plans and gain experience; then, on money borrowed from a friend in France, he bought an island in the Paumotus. It was a ring of land round a deep lagoon, uninhabited, and covered only with scrub and wild guava. With the intrepid woman who was his wife, and a few natives, he landed there, and set about building a house, and clearing the scrub so that he could plant coconuts. That was twenty years before, and now what had been a barren island was a garden.

"It was hard and anxious work at first, and we worked strenuously, both of us. Every day I was up at dawn, clearing, planting, working on my house, and at night when I threw myself on my bed it was to sleep like a log till morning. My wife worked as hard as I did. Then children were born to us, first a son and then a daughter. My wife and I have taught them all they know. We had a piano sent out from France, and she has taught them to play and to speak English, and I have taught them Latin and mathematics, and we read history together. They can sail a boat. They can swim as well as the natives. There is nothing about the land of which they are ignorant. Our trees have prospered, and there is shell on my reef. I have come to Tahiti now to buy a

schooner. I can get enough shell to make it worth while to fish for it, and, who knows? I may find pearls. I have made something where there was nothing. I too have made beauty. Ah, you do not know what it is to look at those tall, healthy trees and think that every one I planted myself."

"Let me ask you the question that you asked Strickland. Do you never regret France and your old home in Brittany?"

"Some day, when my daughter is married and my son has a wife and is able to take my place on the island, we shall go back and finish our days in the old house in which I was born."

"You will look back on a happy life," I said.

"*Evidemment*, it is not exciting on my island, and we are very far from the world—imagine, it takes me four days to come to Tahiti—but we are happy there. It is given to few men to attempt a work and to achieve it. Our life is simple and innocent. We are untouched by ambition, and what pride we have is due only to our contemplation of the work of our hands. Malice cannot touch us, nor envy attack. Ah, *mon cher monsieur*, they talk of the blessedness of labour, and it is a meaningless phrase, but to me it has the most intense significance. I am a happy man."

"I am sure you deserve to be," I smiled.

"I wish I could think so. I do not know how I have deserved to have a wife who was the perfect friend and helpmate, the perfect mistress and the perfect mother."

I reflected for a while on the life that the captain suggested to my imagination.

"It is obvious that to lead such an existence and make so great a success of it, you must both have needed a strong will and a determined character."

"Perhaps; but without one other factor we could have achieved nothing."

"And what was that?"

He stopped, somewhat dramatically, and stretched out his arm.

"Belief in God. Without that we should have been lost."

Then we arrived at the house of Dr. Coutras.

CHAPTER LV

DR. COUTRAS was an old Frenchman of great stature and exceeding bulk. His body was shaped like a huge duck's egg; and his eyes, sharp, blue, and good-natured, rested now and then with self-satisfaction on his enormous paunch. His complexion was florid and his hair white. He was a man to attract immediate sympathy. He received us in a room that might have been in a house in a provincial town in France, and the one or two Polynesian curios had an odd look. He took my hand in both of his—they were huge—and gave me a hearty look, in which, however, was great shrewdness. When he shook hands with Capitaine Brunot he enquired politely after *Madame et les enfants*. For some minutes there was an exchange of courtesies and some local gossip about the island, the prospects of the copra and the vanilla crop; then we came to the object of my visit.

I shall not tell what Dr. Coutras related to me in his words, but in my own, for I cannot hope to give at second hand any impression of his vivacious delivery. He had a deep, resonant voice, fitted to his massive frame, and a keen sense of the dramatic. To listen to him was, as the phrase goes, as good^a as a play; and much better than most.

It appears that Dr. Coutras had gone one day to Taravao in order to see an old chiefess, who was ill, and he gave a vivid picture of the obese old lady, lying in a huge bed, smoking cigarettes, and surrounded by a crowd of dark-skinned retainers. When he had seen her he was taken into another room and given dinner—raw fish, fried bananas, and chicken—*que sais-je?* the typical dinner of the *indigène*—and while he was eating it he saw a young girl being driven away from the door in tears. He thought nothing of it, but when he went out to get into his trap and drive home, he saw her again, standing a little way off; she looked at him with a woebegone air, and tears streamed down her cheeks. He asked someone what was wrong with her, and was told that she had come down from the hills to ask him to visit a white man who was sick. They had told her that the doctor could not be disturbed. He called her, and himself asked what she wanted. She told him that Ata had sent her, she who used to be at the Hôtel de la Fleur, and that the Red One was ill. She thrust into his hand a crumpled piece of newspaper, and when he opened it he found in it a hundred-franc note.

"Who is the Red One?" he asked of one of the bystanders.

He was told that that was what they called the Englishman, a painter, who lived with Ata up in the valley seven kilometres from where they were. He recognised Strickland by the description. But it was necessary to walk. It was impossible for him to go; that was why they had sent the girl away.

"I confess," said the doctor, turning to me, "that I hesitated. I did not relish fourteen kilometres over a bad pathway, and there was no chance that I could get back to Papeete that night. Besides, Strickland was not sympathetic to me. He was an idle, useless scoundrel, who preferred to live with a native woman rather than work for his living like the rest of us. *Mon Dieu*, how was I to know that one day the world would come to the conclusion that he had genius? I asked the girl if he was not well enough to have come down to see me. I asked her what she thought was the matter with him. She would not answer. I pressed her, angrily perhaps, but she looked down on the ground and began to cry. Then I shrugged my shoulders; after all, perhaps it was my duty to go, and in a very bad temper I bade her lead the way."

His temper was certainly no better when he arrived, perspiring freely and thirsty. Ata was on the look-out for him, and came a little way along the path to meet him.

"Before I see anyone give me something to drink or I shall die of thirst," he cried out. "*Pour l'amour de Dieu*, get me a coconut."

She called out, and a boy came running along. He swarmed up a tree, and presently threw down a ripe nut. Ata pierced a hole in it, and the doctor took a long, refreshing draught. Then he rolled himself a cigarette and felt in a better humour.

"Now, where is the Red One?" he asked.

"He is in the house, painting. I have not told him you were coming. Go in and see him."

"But what does he complain of? If he is well enough to paint, he is well enough to have come down to Taravao and save me this confounded walk. I presume my time is no less valuable than his."

Ata did not speak, but with the boy followed him to the house. The girl who had brought him was by this time sitting on the veranda, and here was lying an old woman, with her back to the wall, making native cigarettes. Ata pointed to the door. The doctor, wondering irritably why they behaved so strangely, entered, and there found Strickland cleaning his palette. There was a

picture on the easel. Strickland, clad only in a *pareo*, was standing with his back to the door, but he turned round when he heard the sound of boots. He gave the doctor a look of vexation. He was surprised to see him, and resented the intrusion. But the doctor gave a gasp, he was rooted to the floor, and he stared with all his eyes. This was not what he expected. He was seized with horror.

"You enter without ceremony," said Strickland. "What can I do for you?"

The doctor recovered himself, but it required quite an effort for him to find his voice. All his irritation was gone, and he felt—*eh bien, oui, je ne le nie pas*—he felt an overwhelming pity.

"I am Dr. Coutras. I was down at Taravao to see the chiefess, and Ata sent for me to see you."

"She's a damned fool. I have had a few aches and pains lately and a little fever, but that's nothing; it will pass off. Next time anyone went to Papeete I was going to send for some quinine."

"Look at yourself in the glass."

Strickland gave him a glance, smiled, and went over to a cheap mirror in a little wooden frame, that hung on the wall.

"Well?"

"Do you not see a strange change in your face? Do you not see the thickening of your features and a look—how shall I describe it?—the books call it lion-faced. *Mon pauvre ami*, must I tell you that you have a terrible disease?"

"I?"

"When you look at yourself in the glass you see the typical appearance of the leper."

"You are jesting," said Strickland.

"I wish to God I were."

"Do you intend to tell me that I have leprosy?"

"Unfortunately, there can be no doubt about it."

Dr. Coutras had delivered sentence of death on many men, and he could never overcome the horror with which it filled him. He felt always the furious hatred that must seize a man condemned when he compared himself with the doctor, sane and healthy, who had the inestimable privilege of life. Strickland looked at him in silence. Nothing of emotion could be seen on his face, disfigured already by the loathsome disease.

"Do they know?" he asked at last, pointing to the persons on the veranda, now sitting in unusual, unaccountable silence.

"These natives know the signs so well," said the doctor. "They were afraid to tell you."

Strickland stepped to the door and looked out. There must have been something terrible in his face, for suddenly they all burst out into loud cries and lamentation. They lifted up their voices and they wept. Strickland did not speak. After looking at them for a moment, he came back into the room.

"How long do you think I can last?"

"Who knows? Sometimes the disease continues for twenty years. It is a mercy when it runs its course quickly."

Strickland went to his easel and looked reflectively at the picture that stood on it.

"You have had a long journey. It is fitting that the bearer of important tidings should be rewarded. Take this picture. It means nothing to you now, but it may be that one day you will be glad to have it."

Dr. Coutras protested that he needed no payment for his journey; he had already given back to Ata the hundred-franc note, but Strickland insisted that he should take the picture. Then together they went out on the veranda. The natives were sobbing violently.

"Be quiet, woman. Dry thy tears," said Strickland, addressing Ata. "There is no great harm. I shall leave thee very soon."

"They are not going to take thee away?" she cried.

At that time there was no rigid sequestration on the islands, and lepers, if they chose, were allowed to go free.

"I shall go up into the mountain," said Strickland.

Then Ata stood up and faced him.

"Let the others go if they choose, but I will not leave thee. Thou art my man and I am thy woman. If thou leavest me I shall hang myself on the tree that is behind the house. I swear it by God."

There was something immensely forcible in the way she spoke. She was no longer the meek, soft native girl, but a determined woman. She was extraordinarily transformed.

"Why shouldst thou stay with me? Thou canst go back to Papeete, and thou wilt soon find another white man. The old woman can take care of thy children, and Tiaré will be glad to have thee back."

"Thou art my man and I am thy woman. Whither thou goest I will go too."

For a moment Strickland's fortitude was shaken, and a tear

filled each of his eyes and trickled slowly down his cheeks. Then he gave the sardonic smile which was usual with him.

"Women are strange little beasts," he said to Dr. Coutras. "You can treat them like dogs, you can beat them till your arm aches, and still they love you." He shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, it is one of the most absurd illusions of Christianity that they have souls."

"What is it that thou art saying to the doctor?" asked Ata suspiciously. "Thou wilt not go?"

"If it please thee I will stay, poor child."

Ata flung herself on her knees before him, and clasped his legs with her arms and kissed them. Strickland looked at Dr. Coutras with a faint smile.

"In the end they get you, and you are helpless in their hands. White or brown, they are all the same."

Dr. Coutras felt that it was absurd to offer expressions of regret in so terrible a disaster, and he took his leave. Strickland told Tané, the boy, to lead him to the village. Dr. Coutras paused for a moment, and then he addressed himself to me.

"I did not like him, I have told you he was not sympathetic to me, but as I walked slowly down to Taravao I could not prevent an unwilling admiration for the stoical courage which enabled him to bear perhaps the most dreadful of human afflictions. When Tané left me I told him I would send some medicine that might be of service; but my hope was small that Strickland would consent to take it, and even smaller that, if he did, it would do him good. I gave the boy a message for Ata that I would come whenever she sent for me. Life is hard, and Nature takes sometimes a terrible delight in torturing her children. It was with a heavy heart that I drove back to my comfortable home in Papeete."

For a long time none of us spoke.

"But Ata did not send for me," the doctor went on, at last, "and it chanced that I did not go to that part of the island for a long time. I had no news of Strickland. Once or twice I heard that Ata had been to Papeete to buy painting materials, but I did not happen to see her. More than two years passed before I went to Taravao again, and then it was once more to see the old chiefess. I asked them whether they had heard anything of Strickland. By now it was known everywhere that he had leprosy. First Tané, the boy, had left the house, and then, a little time afterwards, the old woman and her grandchild. Strickland and Ata were left alone

with their babies. No one went near the plantation, for, as you know, the natives have a very lively horror of the disease, and in the old days when it was discovered the sufferer was killed; but sometimes when the village boys were scrambling about the hills, they would catch sight of the white man, with his great red beard, wandering about. They fled in terror. Sometimes Ata would come down to the village at night and arouse the trader, so that he might sell her various things of which she stood in need. She knew that the natives looked upon her with the same horrified aversion as they looked upon Strickland, and she kept out of their way. Once some women, venturing nearer than usual to the plantation, saw her washing clothes in the brook, and they threw stones at her. After that the trader was told to give her the message that if she used the brook again men would come and burn down her house."

"Brutes," I said.

"*Mais non, mon cher monsieur*, men are always the same. Fear makes them cruel. . . . I decided to see Strickland, and when I had finished with the chiefess asked for a boy to show me the way. But none would accompany me, and I was forced to find it alone."

When Dr. Coutras arrived at the plantation he was seized with a feeling of uneasiness. Though he was hot from walking, he shivered. There was something hostile in the air which made him hesitate, and he felt that invisible forces barred his way. Unseen hands seemed to draw him back. No one would go near now to gather the coconuts, and they lay rotting on the ground. Everywhere was desolation. The bush was encroaching, and it looked as though very soon the primeval forest would regain possession of that strip of land which had been snatched from it at the cost of so much labour. He had the sensation that here was the abode of pain. As he approached the house he was struck by the unearthly silence, and at first he thought it was deserted. Then he saw Ata. She was sitting on her haunches in the lean-to that served her as kitchen, watching some mess cooking in a pot. Near her a small boy was playing silently in the dirt. She did not smile when she saw him.

"I have come to see Strickland," he said.

"I will go and tell him."

She went to the house, ascended the few steps that led to the veranda, and entered. Dr. Coutras followed her, but waited outside in obedience to her gesture. As she opened the door he smelt

the sickly sweet smell which makes the neighbourhood of the leper nauseous. He heard her speak, and then he heard Strickland's answer, but he did not recognise the voice. It had become hoarse, and indistinct. Dr. Coutras raised his eyebrows. He judged that the disease had already attacked the vocal cords. Then Ata came out again.

"He will not see you. You must go away."

Dr. Coutras insisted, but she would not let him pass. Dr. Coutras shrugged his shoulders, and after a moment's reflection turned away. She walked with him. He felt that she too wanted to be rid of him.

"Is there nothing I can do at all?" he asked.

"You can send him some paints," she said. "There is nothing else he wants."

"Can he paint still?"

"He is painting the walls of the house."

"This is a terrible life for you, my poor child."

Then at last she smiled, and there was in her eyes a look of superhuman love. Dr. Coutras was startled by it, and amazed. And he was awed. He found nothing to say.

"He is my man," she said.

"Where is your other child?" he asked. "When I was here last you had two."

"Yes; it died. We buried it under the mango."

When Ata had gone with him a little way she said she must turn back. Dr. Coutras surmised she was afraid to go farther in case she met any of the people from the village. He told her again that if she wanted him she had only to send and he would come at once.

CHAPTER LVI

THEN two years more went by, or perhaps three, for time passes imperceptibly in Tahiti, and it is hard to keep count of it; but at last a message was brought to Dr. Coutras that Strickland was dying. Ata had waylaid the cart that took the mail into Papeete, and besought the man who drove it to go at once to the doctor. But the doctor was out when the summons came, and it was evening when he received it. It was impossible to start at so late an

hour, and so it was not till next day soon after dawn that he set out. He arrived at Taravao, and for the last time tramped the seven kilometres that led to Ata's house. The path was overgrown, and it was clear that for years now it had remained all but untrodden. It was not easy to find the way. Sometimes he had to stumble along the bed of the stream, and sometimes he had to push through shrubs, dense and thorny; often he was obliged to climb over rocks in order to avoid the hornet-nests that hung on the trees over his head. The silence was intense.

It was with a sigh of relief that at last he came upon the little unpainted house, extraordinarily bedraggled now, and unkempt; but here too was the same intolerable silence. He walked up, and a little boy, playing unconcernedly in the sunshine, started at his approach and fled quickly away: to him the stranger was the enemy. Dr. Coutras had a sense that the child was stealthily watching him from behind a tree. The door was wide open. He called out, but no one answered. He stepped in. He knocked at a door, but again there was no answer. He turned the handle and entered. The stench that assailed him turned him horribly sick. He put his handkerchief to his nose and forced himself to go in. The light was dim, and after the brilliant sunshine for a while he could see nothing. Then he gave a start. He could not make out where he was. He seemed on a sudden to have entered a magic world. He had a vague impression of a great primeval forest and of naked people walking beneath the trees. Then he saw that there were paintings on the walls.

"*Mon Dieu*, I hope the sun hasn't affected me," he muttered.

A slight movement attracted his attention, and he saw that Ata was lying on the floor, sobbing quietly.

"Ata," he called. "Ata."

She took no notice. Again the beastly stench almost made him faint, and he lit a cheroot. His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and now he was seized by an overwhelming sensation as he stared at the painted walls. He knew nothing of pictures, but there was something about these that extraordinarily affected him. From floor to ceiling the walls were covered with a strange and elaborate composition. It was indescribably wonderful and mysterious. It took his breath away. It filled him with an emotion which he could not understand nor analyse. He felt the awe and the delight which a man might feel who watched the beginning of a world. It was tremendous, sensual, passionate; and yet there was

something horrible there too, something which made him afraid. It was the work of a man who had delved into the hidden depths of nature and had discovered secrets which were beautiful and fearful too. It was the work of a man who knew things which it is unholy for men to know. There was something primeval there and terrible. It was not human. It brought to his mind vague recollections of black magic. It was beautiful and obscene.

"*Mon Dieu*, this is genius."

The words were wrung from him, and he did not know he had spoken.

Then his eyes fell on the bed of mats in the corner, and he went up, and he saw the dreadful, mutilated, ghastly object which had been Strickland. He was dead. Dr. Coutras made an effort of will and bent over that battered horror. Then he started violently, and terror blazed in his heart, for he felt that someone was behind him. It was Ata. He had not heard her get up. She was standing at his elbow, looking at what he looked at.

"Good Heavens, my nerves are all distraught," he said. "You nearly frightened me out of my wits."

He looked again at the poor dead thing that had been man, and then he started back in dismay.

"But he was blind."

"Yes; he has been blind for nearly a year."

CHAPTER LVII

AT that moment we were interrupted by the appearance of Madame Coutras, who had been paying visits. She came in, like a ship in full sail, an imposing creature, tall and stout, with an ample bust and an obesity girthed in alarmingly by straight-fronted corsets. She had a bold hooked nose and three chins. She held herself upright. She had not yielded for an instant to the enervating charm of the tropics, but contrariwise was more active, more worldly, more decided than anyone in a temperate clime would have thought it possible to be. She was evidently a copious talker, and now poured forth a breathless stream of anecdote and comment. She made the conversation we had just had seem far away and unreal.

Presently Dr. Coutras turned to me.

"I still have in my *bureau* the picture that Strickland gave me," he said. "Would you like to see it?"

"Willingly."

We got up, and he led me on to the veranda which surrounded his house. We paused to look at the gay flowers that rioted in his garden.

"For a long time I could not get out of my head the recollection of the extraordinary decoration with which Strickland had covered the walls of his house," he said reflectively.

I had been thinking of it too. It seemed to me that here Strickland had finally put the whole expression of himself. Working silently, knowing that it was his last chance, I fancied that here he must have said all that he knew of life and all that he divined. And I fancied that perhaps here he had at last found peace. The demon which possessed him was exorcised at last, and with the completion of the work, for which all his life had been a painful preparation, rest descended on his remote and tortured soul. He was willing to die, for he had fulfilled his purpose.

"What was the subject?" I asked.

"I scarcely know. It was strange and fantastic. It was a vision of the beginnings of the world, the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve—*que sais-je?*—it was a hymn to the beauty of the human form, male and female, and the praise of Nature, sublime, indifferent, lovely, and cruel. It gave you an awful sense of the infinity of space and of the endlessness of time. Because he painted the trees I see about me every day, the coconuts, the banyans, the flamboyants, the alligator-pears, I have seen them ever since differently, as though there were in them a spirit and a mystery which I am ever on the point of seizing and which for ever escapes me. The colours were the colours familiar to me, and yet they were different. They had a significance which was all their own. And those nude men and women. They were on the earth, and yet apart from it. They seemed to possess something of the clay of which they were created, and at the same time something divine. You saw man in the nakedness of his primeval instincts, and you were afraid, for you saw yourself."

Dr. Coutras shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"You will laugh at me. I am a materialist, and I am a gross, fat man—Falstaff, eh?—the lyrical mode does not become me. I make myself ridiculous. But I have never seen painting which made so deep an impression upon me. *Tenez*, I had just the same feeling as

when I went to the Sistine Chapel in Rome. There too I was awed by the greatness of the man who had painted that ceiling. It was genius, and it was stupendous and overwhelming. I felt small and insignificant. But you are prepared for the greatness of Michel Angelo. Nothing had prepared me for the immense surprise of these pictures in a native hut, far away from civilisation, in a fold of the mountain above Taravao. And Michel Angelo is sane and healthy. Those great works of his have the calm of the sublime; but here, notwithstanding beauty, was something troubling. I do not know what it was. It made me uneasy. It gave me the impression you get when you are sitting next door to a room that you know is empty, but in which, you know not why, you have a dreadful consciousness that notwithstanding there is someone. You scold yourself; you know it is only your nerves—and yet, and yet. . . . In a little while it is impossible to resist the terror that seizes you, and you are helpless in the clutch of an unseen horror. Yes; I confess I was not altogether sorry when I heard that those strange masterpieces had been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" I cried.

"*Mais oui*; did you not know?"

"How should I know? It is true I had never heard of this work; but I thought perhaps it had fallen into the hands of a private owner. Even now there is no certain list of Strickland's paintings."

"When he grew blind he would sit hour after hour in those two rooms that he had painted, looking at his works with sightless eyes, and seeing, perhaps, more than he had ever seen in his life before. Ata told me that he never complained of his fate, he never lost courage. To the end his mind remained serene and undisturbed. But he made her promise that when she had buried him—did I tell you that I dug his grave with my own hands, for none of the natives would approach the infected house, and we buried him, she and I, sewn up in three *pareos* joined together, under the mango tree—he made her promise that she would set fire to the house and not leave it till it was burned to the ground and not a stick remained."

I did not speak for a while, for I was thinking. Then I said:

"He remained the same to the end, then."

"Do you understand? I must tell you that I thought it my duty to dissuade her."

"Even after what you have just said?"

"Yes; for I knew that here was a work of genius, and I did not

think we had the right to deprive the world of it. But Ata would not listen to me. She had promised. I would not stay to witness the barbarous deed, and it was only afterwards that I heard what she had done. She poured paraffin on the dry floors and on the pandanus-mats, and then she set fire. In a little while nothing remained but smouldering embers, and a great masterpiece existed no longer.

"I think Strickland knew it was a masterpiece. He had achieved what he wanted. His life was complete. He had made a world and saw that it was good. Then, in pride and contempt, he destroyed it.

"But I must show you my picture," said Dr. Coutras, moving on.

"What happened to Ata and the child?"

"They went to the Marquesas. She had relations there. I have heard that the boy works on one of Cameron's schooners. They say he is very like his father in appearance."

At the door that led from the veranda to the doctor's consulting-room, he paused and smiled.

"It is a fruit-piece. You would think it not a very suitable picture for a doctor's consulting-room, but my wife will not have it in the drawing-room. She says it is frankly obscene."

"A fruit-piece!" I exclaimed in surprise.

We entered the room, and my eyes fell at once on the picture. I looked at it for a long time.

It was a pile of mangoes, bananas, oranges, and I know not what; and at first sight it was an innocent picture enough. It would have been passed in an exhibition of the Post-Impressionists by a careless person as an excellent but not very remarkable example of the school; but perhaps afterwards it would come back to his recollection, and he would wonder why. I do not think then he could ever entirely forget it.

The colours were so strange that words can hardly tell what a troubling emotion they gave. There were sombre blues, opaque like a delicately carved bowl in lapis lazuli, and yet with a quivering lustre that suggested the palpitation of mysterious life; there were purples, horrible like raw and putrid flesh, and yet with a glowing, sensual passion that called up vague memories of the Roman Empire of Heliogabalus; there were reds, shrill like the berries of holly—one thought of Christmas in England, and the snow, the good cheer, and the pleasure of children—and yet by some magic

softened till they had the swooning tenderness of a dove's breast; there were deep yellows that died with an unnatural passion into a green as fragrant as the spring and as pure as the sparkling water of a mountain brook. Who can tell what anguished fancy made these fruits? They belonged to a Polynesian garden of the Hesperides. There was something strangely alive in them, as though they were created in a stage of the earth's dark history when things were not irrevocably fixed to their forms. They were extravagantly luxurious. They were heavy with tropical odours. They seemed to possess a sombre passion of their own. It was enchanted fruit, to taste which might open the gateway to God knows what secrets of the soul and to mysterious palaces of the imagination. They were sullen with unawaited dangers, and to eat them might turn a man to beast or god. All that was healthy and natural, all that clung to happy relationships and the simple joys of simple men, shrunk from them in dismay; and yet a fearful attraction was in them, and, like the fruit on the Tree of the Knowledge, of Good and Evil, they were terrible with the possibilities of the Unknown.

At last I turned away. I felt that Strickland had kept his secret to the grave.

"Voyons, René, *mon ami*," came the loud, cheerful voice of Madame Coutras, "what are you doing all this time? Here are the *apéritifs*. Ask Monsieur if he will not drink a little glass of Quinquina Dubonnet."

"Volontiers, Madame," I said, going out on to the veranda.

The spell was broken.

CHAPTER LVIII

THE time came for my departure from Tahiti. According to the gracious custom of the island, presents were given me by the persons with whom I had been thrown in contact—baskets made of the leaves of the coconut tree, mats of pandanus, fans; and Tiaré gave me three little pearls and three jars of guava jelly made with her own plump hands. When the mail-boat, stopping for twenty-four hours on its way from Wellington to San Francisco, blew the whistle that warned the passengers to get on board, Tiaré clasped me to her vast bosom, so that I seemed to sink into a

billowy sea, and pressed her red lips to mine. Tears glistened in her eyes. And when we steamed slowly out of the lagoon, making our way gingerly through the opening in the reef, and then steered for the open sea, a certain melancholy fell upon me. The breeze was laden still with the pleasant odours of the land. Tahiti is very far away, and I knew that I should never see it again. A chapter of my life was closed, and I felt a little nearer to inevitable death.

Not much more than a month later I was in London; and after I had arranged certain matters which claimed my immediate attention, thinking Mrs. Strickland might like to hear what I knew of her husband's last years, I wrote to her. I had not seen her since long before the war, and I had to look out her address in the telephone book. She made an appointment, and I went to the trim little house on Campden Hill which she now inhabited. She was by this time a woman of hard on sixty, but she bore her years well, and no one would have taken her for more than fifty. Her face, thin and not much lined, was of the sort that ages gracefully, so that you thought in youth she must have been a much handsomer woman than in fact she was. Her hair, not yet very grey, was becomingly arranged, and her black gown was modish. I remembered having heard that her sister, Mrs. MacAndrew, outliving her husband but a couple of years, had left money to Mrs. Strickland; and by the look of the house and the trim maid who opened the door I judged that it was a sum adequate to keep the widow in modest comfort.

When I was ushered into the drawing-room I found that Mrs. Strickland had a visitor, and when I discovered who he was, I guessed that I had been asked to come at just that time not without intention. The caller was Mr. Van Busche Taylor, an American, and Mrs. Strickland gave me particulars with a charming smile of apology to him.

"You know, we English are so dreadfully ignorant. You must forgive me if it's necessary to explain." Then she turned to me. "Mr. Van Busche Taylor is the distinguished American critic. If you haven't read his book your education has been shamefully neglected, and you must repair the omission at once. He's writing something about dear Charlie, and he's come to ask me if I can help him."

Mr. Van Busche Taylor was a very thin man with a large, bald head, bony and shining; and under the great dome of his skull his face, yellow, with deep lines in it, looked very small. He was quiet

and exceedingly polite. He spoke with the accent of New England, and there was about his demeanour a bloodless frigidity which made me ask myself why on earth he was busying himself with Charles Strickland. I had been slightly tickled at the gentleness which Mrs. Strickland put into her mention of her husband's name, and while the pair conversed I took stock of the room in which we sat. Mrs. Strickland had moved with the times. Gone were the Morris papers and gone the severe cretonnes, gone were the Arundel prints that had adorned the walls of her drawing-room in Ashley Gardens; the room blazed with fantastic colour, and I wondered if she knew that those varied hues, which fashion had imposed upon her, were due to the dreams of a poor painter in a South Sea island. She gave me the answer herself.

"What wonderful cushions you have," said Mr. Van Busche Taylor.

"Do you like them?" she said, smiling. "Bakst, you know."

And yet on the walls were coloured reproductions of several of Strickland's best pictures, due to the enterprise of a publisher in Berlin.

"You're looking at my pictures," she said, following my eyes. "Of course, the originals are out of my reach, but it's a comfort to have these. The publisher sent them to me himself. They're a great consolation to me."

"They must be very pleasant to live with," said Mr. Van Busche Taylor.

"Yes; they're so essentially decorative."

"That is one of my profoundest convictions," said Mr. Van Busche Taylor. "Great art is always decorative."

Their eyes rested on a nude woman suckling a baby, while a girl was kneeling by their side holding out a flower to the indifferent child. Looking over them was a wrinkled, scraggy hag. It was Strickland's version of the Holy Family. I suspected that for the figures had sat his household above Taravao, and the woman and the baby were Ata and his first son. I asked myself if Mrs. Strickland had any inkling of the facts.

The conversation proceeded, and I marvelled at the tact with which Mr. Van Busche Taylor avoided all subjects that might have been in the least embarrassing, and at the ingenuity with which Mrs. Strickland, without saying a word that was untrue, insinuated that her relations with her husband had always been perfect. At last Mr. Van Busche Taylor rose to go. Holding his

hostess's hand, he made her a graceful, though perhaps too elaborate, speech of thanks, and left us.

"I hope he didn't bore you," she said, when the door closed behind him. "Of course it's a nuisance sometimes, but I feel it's only right to give people any information I can about Charlie. There's a certain responsibility about having been the wife of a genius."

She looked at me with those pleasant eyes of hers, which had remained as candid and as sympathetic as they had been more than twenty years before. I wondered if she was making a fool of me.

"Of course you've given up your business?" I said.

"Oh yes," she answered airily. "I ran it more by way of a hobby than for any other reason, and my children persuaded me to sell it. They thought I was overtaxing my strength."

I saw that Mrs. Strickland had forgotten that she had ever done anything so disgraceful as to work for her living. She had the true instinct of the nice woman that it is only really decent for her to live on other people's money.

"They're here now," she said. "I thought they'd like to hear what you had to say about their father. You remember Robert, don't you? I'm glad to say he's been recommended for the Military Cross."

She went to the door and called them. There entered a tall man in khaki, with the parson's collar, handsome in a somewhat heavy fashion, but with the frank eyes that I remembered in him, as a boy. He was followed by his sister. She must have been the same age as was her mother when first I knew her, and she was very like her. She too gave one the impression that as a girl she must have been prettier than indeed she was.

"I suppose you don't remember them in the least," said Mrs. Strickland, proud and smiling. "My daughter is now Mrs. Ronaldson. Her husband's a major in the Gunners."

"He's by way of being a pukka soldier, you know," said Mrs. Ronaldson gaily. "That's why he's only a major."

I remembered my anticipation long ago that she would marry a soldier. It was inevitable. She had all the graces of the soldier's wife. She was civil and affable, but she could hardly conceal her intimate conviction that she was not quite as others were. Robert was breezy.

"It's a bit of luck that I should be in London when you turned up," he said. "I've only got three days' leave."

"He's dying to get back," said his mother.

"Well, I don't mind confessing it, I have a rattling good time at the front. I've made a lot of good pals. It's a first-rate life. Of course war's terrible, and all that sort of thing; but it does bring out the best qualities in a man, there's no denying that."

Then I told them what I had learnt about Charles Strickland in Tahiti. I thought it unnecessary to say anything of Ata and her boy, but for the rest I was as accurate as I could be. When I had narrated his lamentable death I ceased. For a minute or two we were all silent. Then Robert Strickland struck a match and lit a cigarette.

"The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small," he said, somewhat impressively.

Mrs. Strickland and Mrs. Ronaldson looked down with a slightly pious expression which indicated, I felt sure, that they thought the quotation was from Holy Writ. Indeed, I was unconvinced that Robert Strickland did not share their illusion. I do not know why I suddenly thought of Strickland's son by Ata. They had told me he was a merry, light-hearted youth. I saw him, with my mind's eye, on the schooner on which he worked, wearing nothing but a pair of dungarees; and at night, when the boat sailed along easily before a light breeze, and the sailors were gathered on the upper deck, while the captain and the supercargo lolled in deck-chairs, smoking their pipes, I saw him dance with another lad, dance wildly, to the wheezy music of the concertina. Above was the blue sky, and the stars, and all about the desert of the Pacific Ocean.

A quotation from the Bible came to my lips, but I held my tongue, for I know that clergymen think it a little blasphemous when the laity poach upon their preserves. My Uncle Harry, for twenty-seven years Vicar of Whitstable, was on these occasions in the habit of saying that the devil could always quote scripture to his purpose. He remembered the days when you could get thirteen Royal Natives for a shilling.

THE NARROW CORNER

*Short therefore, is man's life, and
narrow is the corner of the earth
wherein he dwells.*

The Narrow Corner

CHAPTER I

All this happened a good many years ago.

CHAPTER II

DR. SAUNDERS yawned. It was nine o'clock in the morning. The day lay before him and he had nothing in the world to do. He had already seen a few patients. There was no doctor on the island and on his arrival such as had anything the matter with them seized the opportunity to consult him. But the place was not unhealthy and the ailments he was asked to cure were chronic, and he could do little; or they were trifling, and responded quickly to simple remedies. Dr. Saunders had practised for fifteen years in Fu-chou and had acquired a great reputation among the Chinese for his skill in dealing with the ills that affect the eye, and it was to remove a cataract for a rich Chinese merchant that he had come to Takana. This was an island in the Malay Archipelago, a long way down, and the distance from Fu-chou was so great that at first he had refused to go. But the Chinese, Kim Ching by name, was himself a native of that city and two of his sons lived there. He was well-acquainted with Dr. Saunders, and on his periodical visits to Fu-chou had consulted him on his failing sight. He had heard how the doctor, by what looked like a miracle, had caused the blind to see, and when in due course he found himself in such a state that he could only tell day from night, he was prepared to trust no one else to perform the operation which he was assured would restore his sight. Dr. Saunders had advised him to come to Fu-chou when certain symptoms appeared, but he had delayed, fearing the surgeon's knife, and when at last he could no longer distinguish one object from another the long journey made him nervous and he bade his sons persuade the doctor to come to him.

Kim Ching had started life as a coolie, but by hard work and courage, aided by good luck, dunning and unscrupulousness, he had amassed a large fortune. At this time, a man of seventy, he owned large plantations on several islands; his own schooner fished for pearl, and he traded extensively in all the products of the Archipelago. His sons, themselves middle-aged men, went to see Dr. Saunders. They were his friends and patients. Two or three times a year they invited him to a grand dinner, when they gave him bird's-nest soup, shark fins, *bêche de mer* and many other delicacies; singing girls engaged at a high price entertained the company with their performances; and everyone got tight. The Chinese liked Dr. Saunders. He spoke the dialect of Fu-chou with fluency. He lived, not like the other foreigners in the settlement, but in the heart of the Chinese city; he stayed there year in and year out and they had become accustomed to him. They knew that he smoked opium, though with moderation, and they knew what else there was to be known about him. He seemed to them a sensible man. It did not displease them that the foreigners in the community turned a cold shoulder on him. He never went to the club but to read the papers when the mail came in, and was never invited to dinner by them; they had their own English doctor and called in Dr. Saunders only when he was away on leave. But when they had anything the matter with their eyes they put their disapproval in their pockets and came down for treatment to the shabby little Chinese house over the river where Dr. Saunders dwelt happily amid the stench of a native city. They looked about them with distaste as they sat in what was both the doctor's consulting-room and parlour. It was furnished in the Chinese style but for a roll-top desk and a couple of rocking-chairs much the worse for wear. On the discoloured walls Chinese scrolls, presented by grateful patients, contrasted oddly with the sheet of cardboard on which were printed in different sizes and combinations the letters of the alphabet. It always seemed to them that there hung about the house faintly the acrid scent of opium.

But this the sons of Kim Ching did not notice, and if they had it would not have incommoded them. After the usual compliments had passed and Dr. Saunders had offered them cigarettes from a green tin, they set forth their business. Their father had bidden them say that now, too old and too blind to make the journey to Fu-chou, he desired Dr. Saunders to come to Takana and perform the operation which he had said two years before would be

necessary. What would be his fee? The doctor shook his head. He had a large practice in Fu-chou and it was out of the question for him to absent himself for any length of time. He saw no reason why Kim Ching should not come there; he could come on one of his own schooners. If that did not suit him he could get a surgeon from Macassar who was perfectly competent to perform the operation. The sons of Kim Ching, talking very volubly, explained that their father knew that there was no one who could do the miracles that Dr. Saunders could, and he was determined that no one else should touch him. He was prepared to double the sum that the doctor reckoned he could earn at Fu-chou during the period he would be away. Dr. Saunders continued to shake his head. Then the two brothers looked at one another and the elder took out from an inner pocket a large and shabby wallet of black leather bulging with the notes of the Chartered Bank. He spread them out before the doctor, a thousand dollars, two thousand dollars; the doctor smiled and his sharp, bright eyes twinkled; the Chinese continued to spread out the notes; the two brothers were smiling too, ingratiatingly, but they keenly watched the doctor's face and presently they were conscious of a change in his expression. He did not move. His eyes kept their tolerant good-humour, but they felt in their bones that his interest was aroused. Kim Ching's elder son paused and looked inquiringly into his face.

"I can't leave all my patients for three solid months," said the doctor. "Let Kim Ching get one of the Dutch doctors from Macassar or Amboyna. There's a fellow at Amboyna who's quite all right."

The Chinese did not reply. He put more notes on the table. They were hundred-dollar bills and he arranged them in little packets of ten. The wallet bulged less. He laid the packets side by side and at last there were ten of them.

"Stop," said the doctor. "That'll do."

CHAPTER III

It was a complicated journey. From Fu-chou he went on a Chinese vessel to Manila in the Philippines, and from there, after waiting a few days, by cargo boat to Macassar. Thence he took passage on the Dutch ship that ran every other month to Merauke in New

Guinea, stopping at a great many places on the way, and thus at last landed at Takana. He travelled with a Chinese boy who acted as his servant, gave anæsthetics when required and made his pipes when he smoked opium. Dr. Saunders performed a successful operation on Kim Ching, and now there was nothing for him to do but sit and twiddle his thumbs till the Dutch ship called on her way back from Merauke. The island was fairly large, but it was isolated and the Dutch Régisseur visited it only at intervals. The Government was represented by a half-caste Javanese, who spoke no English, and a few policemen. The town consisted of a single street of shops. Two or three were owned by Arabs from Baghdad, but the rest by Chinese. There was a small rest-house about ten minutes' walk from the town which the Régisseur inhabited on his periodical visits, and here Dr. Saunders had installed himself. The path that led to it ran on through plantations for three miles, and then was lost in the virgin jungle.

When the Dutch ship came in, there was a certain animation. The captain, one or two of the officers and the chief engineer came ashore, and the passengers if there were any, and they sat in Kim Ching's store and drank beer, but they never stayed for more than three hours and when they got back into their boat and rowed away the little town went to sleep again. It was in the doorway of this store that Dr. Saunders sat now. There was a rattan awning that protected it from the sun, but in the street the sun beat down with a harsh glare. A mangy dog sniffed about some offal over which a swarm of flies was buzzing and looked for something to eat. Two or three chickens scratched about in the roadway and one, squatting, ruffled her feathers in the dust. Outside the shop opposite a naked Chinese child with a distended belly was trying to make a sand castle out of the dust in the road. Flies flew about him, settling on him, but he did not mind them, and intent on his game did not try to brush them away. Then a native passed, with nothing on but a discoloured sarong, and he carried two baskets of sugar-cane suspended to each end of a pole balanced on one shoulder. With his shuffling feet he kicked up the dust as he walked. Inside the store a clerk, hunched over a table, was busy with brush and ink writing some document in Chinese characters. A coolie sitting on the floor was rolling cigarettes and smoking them one after the other. No one came in to buy. Dr. Saunders asked for a bottle of beer. The clerk left his writing and going to the back of the store took a bottle out of a pail of

water and brought it along with a glass to the doctor. It was pleasantly cool.

Time hung somewhat heavily on the doctor's hands, but he was not discontented. He was able to amuse himself with little things, and the mangy dog, the thin chickens, the pot-bellied child all diverted him. He drank his bottle of beer slowly.

CHAPTER IV

HE looked up. He gave a cry of surprise. For there, strolling towards him, down the middle of the dusty road, were two white men. No ship was in and he wondered where they had come from. They walked idly, looking to right and left of them, like strangers visiting the island for the first time. They were shabbily dressed in trousers and singlets. Their tops were grimy. They came up, saw him sitting in the open shop and stopped. One of them addressed him.

"Is this Kim Ching's?"

"Yes."

"Is he here?"

"No, he's sick."

"Bad luck. I suppose we can get a drink."

"Surely."

The speaker turned to his companion.

"Come on in."

They entered.

"What'll you have?" asked Dr. Saunders.

"A bottle of beer for me."

"Same here," said the other.

The doctor gave the order to the coolie. He brought bottles of beer and chairs for the strangers to sit on. One of them was middle-aged, with a sallow, lined face, white hair and a scrub of white moustache. He was of the middle height, spare, and when he spoke he showed hideously decayed teeth. His eyes were cunning and restless. They were small and pale and set somewhat close together, which gave him a foxy look, but his manner was ingratiating.

"Where have you come from?" asked the doctor.

"We just come in on a lugger. From Thursday Island."

"A goodish way. Håve fine weather?"

"Couldn't want better. A nice breeze and no sea to speak of. Nichols's my name. Captain Nichols. Maybe you've 'eard of me."

"I can't say I have."

"I been sailin' these seas for thirty years. There's not an island in the Archipelago I ain't put in at one time or another. I'm pretty well known around 'ere. Kim Ching knows me. Known me for twenty years."

"I'm a stranger myself," said the doctor.

Captain Nichols looked at him, and though his face was open and his expression cordial, you had a feeling that there was suspicion in his glance.

"I seem to know your face," he said. "I could swear I seen you somewhere."

Dr. Saunders smiled but did not volunteer any information about himself. Captain Nichols screwed up his eyes in the effort to remember where he had run across the little man. He scanned his face with attention. The doctor was short, only just over five foot six, and slight, but with something of a paunch. His hands were soft and podgy, but they were small, with tapering fingers, and if he had been vain it was possible to suppose that once upon a time he had been not a little pleased with them. They had still a sort of well-bred elegance. He was very ugly, with a snub nose and a large mouth; and when he laughed, which he did often, you saw big, yellow, uneven teeth. Under his bushy grey eyebrows his green eyes gleamed bright, amusing and clever. He was not very closely shaved and his skin was blotchy; he had a high colour which over the cheek-bones spread into a purple flush. It suggested some long-standing affection of the heart. His hair must once have been thick and black and coarse, but now it was nearly white and on the crown very thin. But his ugliness, far from being repellent, was attractive. When he laughed his skin puckered round the eyes, giving his face infinite vivacity, and his expression was charged with an extreme but not ill-natured malice. You would have taken him then for a buffoon, but for the shrewdness that gleamed from his shining eyes. His intelligence was obvious. And though merry and bright, fond of a joke and amused both at his own and at others', you had an impression that even in the abandon of laughter he never quite gave himself away. He seemed to be on his guard. For all his chattiness and however hearty his

manner, you were conscious (if you were observant and did not allow yourself to be taken in by his superficial frankness) that those merry, laughing eyes were watching, weighing, judging and forming an opinion. He was not a man to take things at their face value.

Since the doctor did not speak Captain Nichols went on:

"This is Fred Blake," he said, with a gesture of his thumb towards his companion.

Dr. Saunders nodded.

"Makin' a long stay?" continued the captain.

"I'm waiting for the Dutch packet."

"North or south?"

"North."

"What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't mention it. Saunders."

"I've knocked about too long in the Indian Ocean to ask questions," said the captain, with his ingratiating laugh. "Ask no questions and you won't be told no lies. Saunders? I've known a lot of chaps as answered to that name, but whether it was theirs or not by rights nobody knew but themselves. What's the matter with old Kim Ching? Fine old sport. I was lookin' forward to 'avin' a bit of a chin-wag with 'im."

"His eyes went back on him. He's had cataract."

Captain Nichols sat up and held out his hand.

"Doc Saunders. I knew I'd seen your face. Fu-chou. I was up there seven years ago."

The doctor took the proffered hand. Captain Nichols turned to his friend.

"Everyone knows Doc Saunders. Best doctor in the Far East. Eyes. That's his line. I 'ad a pal once, everyone said 'e'd go blind, nothing could stop it, 'e went to see the doc and in a month 'e could see as well as you or me. The Chinks just swear by him. Doc Saunders. Well, this is a joyful surprise. I thought you never left Fu-chou from one year's end to the other."

"Well, I have now."

"It's a bit of luck for me, this. You're the very man I wanted to meet." Captain Nichols leaned forward and his cunning eyes fixed the doctor with an intensity in which there was something very like menace. "I suffer from dyspepsia something awful."

"Oh, Christ!" muttered Fred Blake.

It was the first time he had spoken since they sat down and Dr.

Saunders turned to look at him. He slouched in his chair, gnawing his fingers, in an attitude that suggested boredom and ill-humour. He was a tall young man, slight but wiry, with curly, dark brown hair and large blue eyes. He did not look more than twenty. In his dirty singlet and dungarees he looked loutish, an unlicked cub, thought the doctor, and there was a surliness in his expression that was somewhat disagreeable; but he had a straight nose and a well-formed mouth.

"Leave off bitin' your nails, Fred," said the captain. "Disgustin' 'abit, I call it."

"You and your dyspepsia," retorted the young man, with a chuckle.

When he smiled you saw that he had exquisite teeth. They were very white, small and of a perfect shape; they were so unexpected a grace in that sombre face, their beauty was so dazzling, that you were taken aback. His sulky smile had great sweetness.

"You can laugh because you don't know what it is," said Captain Nichols. "I'm a martyr to it. Don't say I'm not careful what I eat. I've tried everything. Nothin' does me any good. This beer now. Do you think I shan't suffer for it? You know just as well as I do that I shall."

"Go on. Tell the doctor all about it," said Blake.

Captain Nichols asked nothing better. He proceeded to narrate the history of his malady. He described his symptoms with a scientific accuracy. There was not a revolting detail that he omitted to mention. He enumerated the doctors he had consulted and the patent remedies he had tried. Dr. Saunders listened in silence, an expression of sympathetic interest on his face, and occasionally nodded his head.

"If there's anyone as can do anythin' for me it's you, Doc," said the captain earnestly. "They don't 'ave to tell me you're clever, I can see that for meself."

"I can't work miracles. You can't expect anyone to do much in a minute for a chronic condition like yours."

"No, I don't ask that, but you can prescribe for me, can't you? There's nothin' I won't try. What I'd like you to do is to make a thorough examination of me, see?"

"How long are you staying here?"

"Our time's our own."

"But we're pushing off as soon as we've got what we want," said Blake.

A quick look passed between the two men. Dr. Saunders noticed it. He did not know why he had an impression that there was something strange in it.

"What made you put in here?" he asked.

Fred Blake's face once more grew sullen, and when the doctor put his question he threw him a glance. Dr. Saunders read suspicion in it and perhaps fear. He wondered. It was the captain who replied.

"I've known Kim Ching donkey's years. We wanted some stores, and we thought it wouldn't do us any 'arm to fill up our tank."

"Are you trading?"

"In a manner of speakin'. If anythin' comes along we ain't goin' to miss a chance. Who would?"

"What cargo are you carrying?"

"A bit of everything."

Captain Nichols smiled genially, showing his decayed, discoloured teeth, and he looked strangely shifty and dishonest. It occurred to Dr. Saunders that perhaps they were smuggling opium.

"You're not going to Macassar by any chance?"

"We might be."

"What's that paper?" said Fred Blake suddenly, pointing to one that lay on the counter.

"Oh, that's three weeks old. We brought it down in the ship I came on."

"Have they got any Australian papers here?"

"No."

Dr. Saunders chuckled at the notion.

"Is there any Australian news in that paper?"

"It's Dutch. I don't know Dutch. In any case, you'd have had later news than that on Thursday Island."

Blake frowned a little. The captain grinned craftily.

"This ain't exactly the hub of the universe, Fred," he sniggered.

"Don't you ever have any English papers here at all?" asked Blake.

"Now and then a stray copy of the Hong-Kong paper finds its way here or a *Straits Times*, but they're a month old."

"Don't they ever get any news?"

"Only what the Dutch ship brings."

"Haven't they got a cable or a wireless?"

"No."

"If a man wanted to keep out of the way of the police I should think he'd be pretty safe here," said Captain Nichols.

"For some time, anyway," agreed the doctor.

"Have another bottle of beer, Doc?" asked Blake.

"No, I don't think I will. I'm going back to the rest-house. If you two fellows would like to come and dine there to-night, I can get you some sort of a meal."

He addressed himself to Blake because he had a feeling that his impulse would be to refuse, but it was Captain Nichols who answered.

"That'd be fine. A change from the lugger."

"You don't want to be bothered with us," said Blake.

"No bother. I'll meet you here about six. We'll have a few drinks and then go up."

The doctor rose, nodded and left.

CHAPTER V

BUT he did not go immediately to the rest-house. The invitation he had so cordially given to these strangers was due to no sudden urge of hospitality, but to a notion that had come into his head while he was talking to them. Now that he had left Fu-chou and his practice, he was in no hurry to get back, and he had made up his mind to make a trip to Java, his first holiday for many years, before he returned to work. It occurred to him that if they would give him a passage on the lugger, if not to Macassar, at least to one of the more frequented islands, he could then find a steamer to take him in the direction he wished to go. He had been resigned to spending another three weeks or so on Takana when it seemed impossible to get away; but Kim Ching needed his services no longer, and now that a chance offered he was seized with an immense eagerness to profit by it. The thought of staying where he was for so long with nothing to do suddenly became intolerable to him. He walked down the broad street—it was less than half a mile long—till he came to the sea. There was no quay. Coconuts grew to the water's edge, and among them were the huts of the natives of the island. Children were playing about and gaunt pigs rooted among the piles. There was a straight line of silver beach

with a few prahus and dug-outs drawn up on it. The coral sand glistened under the fiery sun, and even with shoes on it was hot under the soles of your feet. Hideous crabs scuttled out of your way as you walked. One of the prahus lay bottom up and three dark-skinned Malays in sarongs were working on it. A reef a few hundred yards out formed a lagoon, and in this the water was clear and deep. A small crowd of boys were romping in the shallow. One of Kim Ching's schooners lay at anchor and not far from it was the strangers' lugger. She was very shabby beside Kim Ching's trim craft and badly needed a coat of paint. She seemed very small to rove the trackless ocean, and Dr. Saunders had a moment's hesitation. He looked up at the sky. It was cloudless. No wind stirred the leaves of the coconut trees. * Drawn up on the beach was a squat little dinghy, and he supposed it was in this that the two men had rowed ashore. He could see no crew on the lugger.

Having had a good look, he turned back and strolled along to the rest-house. He changed into the Chinese trousers and silk tunic in which from long habit he felt most at ease, and taking a book went out to sit on the veranda. Fruit trees grew round about the rest-house, and opposite, on the other side of the path, was a handsome grove of coconuts. They rose, very tall and straight, in their regular lines, and the bright sun, piercing the leaves, splashed the ground with a fantastic pattern of yellow light. Behind him, in the cook-house, the boy was preparing tiffin.

Dr. Saunders was not a great reader. He seldom opened a novel. Interested in character, he liked books that displayed the oddities of human nature, and he had read over and over again Pepys and Boswell's Johnson, Florio's Montaigne and Hazlitt's essays. He liked old travel books, and he could peruse with pleasure the accounts in Hakluyt of countries he had never been to. He had at home a considerable library of the books written about China by the early missionaries. He read neither for information nor to improve his mind, but sought in books occasion for reverie. He read with a sense of humour peculiar to himself, and was able to get out of the narratives of missionary enterprise an amount of demure fun which would have much surprised the authors. He was a quiet man, of an agreeable discourse, but not one to force his conversation on you, and he could enjoy his little joke without feeling a desire to impart it to another.

He held in his hand now a volume of Père Huc's travels, but he read with divided attention. His thoughts were occupied with the

two strangers who had so unexpectedly appeared on the island. Dr. Saunders had known so many thousands of people in his Eastern life that he had no difficulty in placing Captain Nichols. He was a bad hat. By his accent he was English, and if he had knocked about the China seas for so many years it was likely that he had got into some trouble in England. Dishonesty was stamped on his mean and crafty features. He could not have prospered greatly if he was no more now than skipper of this shabby little lugger, and Dr. Saunders let a sigh, an ironical sigh, fall on the still air as he reflected how seldom it was that the crook received an adequate return for his labours. But of course the probability was that Captain Nichols preferred dirty work to clean. He was the sort of man who was willing to put his hand to anything. You would not trust him out of your sight. You could rely on him for nothing but to do you down. He had said he knew Kim Ching. It was probable that he was more often out of a job than in one, and he would have been glad enough to take employment under a Chinese owner. He was the kind of fellow you would engage if you had something shady to do, and it might very well be that at one time he had been skipper of one of Kim Ching's schooners. The conclusion Dr. Saunders arrived at was that he rather liked Captain Nichols. He was taken by the skipper's genial friendliness it gave a pleasant savour to his roguery, and the dyspepsia he suffered from added a comic note that pleased. The doctor was glad that he would see him again that evening.

Dr. Saunders took an interest in his fellows that was not quite scientific and not quite human. He wanted to receive entertainment from them. He regarded them dispassionately and it gave him just the same amusement to unravel the intricacies of the individual as a mathematician might find in the solution of a problem. He made no use of the knowledge he obtained. The satisfaction he got from it was æsthetic, and if to know and judge men gave him a subtle sense of superiority he was unconscious of it. He had fewer prejudices than most men. The sense of disapproval was left out of him. Many people are indulgent to the vices they practise, and have small patience with those they have no mind to; some, broader-minded, can accept them all in a comprehensive toleration, a toleration, however, that is more often theoretical than practical; but few can suffer manners different from their own without distaste. It is seldom that a man is shocked by the thought that someone has seduced another's wife, and it

may be that he preserves his equanimity when he knows that another has cheated at cards or forged a cheque (though this is not easy when you are yourself the victim), but it is hard for him to make a bosom friend of one who drops his aitches and almost impossible if he scoops up gravy with his knife. Dr. Saunders lacked this sensitiveness. Unpleasant table manners affected him as little as a purulent ulcer. Right and wrong were no more to him than good weather and bad weather. He took them as they came. He judged but he did not condemn. He laughed.

He was very easy to get on with. He was much liked. But he had no friends. He was an agreeable companion, but neither sought intimacy nor gave it. There was no one in the world to whom he was not at heart indifferent. He was self-sufficient. His happiness depended not on persons but on himself. He was selfish, but since he was at the same time shrewd and disinterested, few knew it and none was inconvenienced by it. Because he wanted nothing, he was never in anybody's way. Money meant little to him, and he never much minded whether patients paid him or not. They thought him philanthropic. Since time was as unimportant to him as cash, he was just as willing to doctor them as not. It amused him to see their ailments yield to treatment, and he continued to find entertainment in human nature. He confounded persons and patients. Each was like another page in an interminable book, and that there were so many repetitions oddly added to the interest. It was curious to see how all these people, white, yellow and brown, responded to the critical situations of humanity, but the sight neither touched his heart nor troubled his nerves. Death was, after all, the greatest event in every man's life, and he never ceased to find interest in the way he faced it. It was with a little thrill that he sought to pierce into a man's consciousness, looking through the eyes, frightened, defiant, sullen or resigned, into the soul confronted for the first time with the knowledge that its race was run, but the thrill was merely one of curiosity. His sensibility was unaffected. He felt neither sorrow nor pity. He only faintly wondered how it was that what was so important to one could matter so little to another. And yet his manner was full of sympathy. He knew exactly what to say to alleviate the terror or pain of the moment, and he left no one but fortified, consoled and encouraged. It was a game that he played, and it gave him satisfaction to play it well. He had great natural kindness, but it was a kindness of instinct, which betokened no interest in the recipient:

he would come to the rescue if you were in a fix, but if there was no getting you out of it would not bother about you further. He did not like to kill living things, and he would neither shoot nor fish. He went so far, for no reason other than that he felt that every creature had a right to life, that he preferred to brush away a mosquito or a fly than to swat it. Perhaps he was an intensely logical man. It could not be denied that he led a good life (if at least you did not confine goodness to conformity with your own sensual inclinations), for he was charitable and kindly, and he devoted his energies to the alleviation of pain, but if motive counts for righteousness, then he deserved no praise; for he was influenced in his actions neither by love, pity, nor charity.

CHAPTER VI

DR. SAUNDERS sat down to tiffin and having finished went into the bedroom and threw himself on his bed. But it was very hot and he could not sleep. He wondered what the connection was between Captain Nichols and Fred Blake. Notwithstanding his grimy dungarees, the young man did not give the impression of being a sailor; the doctor did not quite know why, and for want of a better reason surmised that it was because he had not got the sea in his eyes. He was hard to place. He spoke with something of an Australian accent, but he was evidently not a rough-neck, and he might have had some education: his manners seemed quite good. Perhaps his people had a business of sorts in Sydney, and he was used to a comfortable home and decent surroundings. But why he was sailing these lonely seas on a pearling lugger with a scoundrel like Captain Nichols was mysterious. Of course the pair of them might be in partnership, but what traffic they were engaged in remained to be seen. Dr. Saunders was inclined to believe that it was not a very honest one, and, whatever it was, that Fred Blake would get the thin end of the stick.

Though Dr. Saunders was stark naked, the sweat poured off him. Between his legs was a Dutch wife. This is the bolster which they use in those parts for coolness' sake, and many grow so accustomed to it that even in temperate climes they cannot sleep without it; but it was strange to the doctor and it irked him. He threw it aside and rolled over on his back. In the garden round the

rest-house, in the coconut grove opposite; a myriad insects were making noise and the insistent din, which generally fell unheard on ears benumbed, now throbbed on his nerves with a racket to awake the dead. He gave up the attempt to sleep and, wrapping a sarong round him, went out again on to the veranda. It was as hot there as within and as airless. He was weary. His mind was restless, but it worked perversely, and thoughts jerked through his brain like the misfirings of a defective carburettor. He tried to cool himself with a bath, but it brought no refreshment to his spirit. It remained hot, listless and uneasy. The veranda was intolerable, and he threw himself once more on his bed. The air under the mosquito curtains seemed to stand still. He could not read, he could not think, he could not rest. The hours were leaden-footed.

He was aroused at last by a voice on the steps, and going out he found ~~there~~ a messenger from Kim Ching, who asked him to go and see him. The doctor had paid his patient a professional visit that morning, and there was nothing much more he could do for him, but he put on his clothes and sallied forth. Kim Ching had heard of the lugger's arrival, and was curious to know what the strangers wanted. He had been told that the doctor had spent an hour with them that morning. He did not much care for unknown persons to come to the island, so much of which belonged to him. Captain Nichols had sent a message asking to see him, but the Chinese had replied that he was too sick to receive anyone. The captain claimed acquaintance with him, but Kim Ching had no recollection of him. An accurate description of the man had already reached him, and the doctor's account added nothing to help him. It appeared that they were staying two or three days.

"They told me they were sailing at dawn," said Dr. Saunders. He reflected for a moment. "Perhaps they changed their plans when I told them there was no cable or wireless on the island."

"They've got nothing in the lugger but ballast," said Kim Ching. "Stones."

"No cargo at all?"

"Nothing."

"Opium?"

Kim Ching shook his head. The doctor smiled.

"Perhaps it's just a pleasure trip. The skipper's got stomach trouble. He wants me to do something for him."

Kim Ching gave an exclamation. That gave him the clue. He remembered. He had had Captain Nichols on one of his schooners,

eight or ten years before, and had fired him. There had been some dispute, but Kim Ching did not go into any detail.

"He's a bad man," said Kim Ching. "I could have had him put in prison."

Dr. Saunders guessed that the transaction, whatever it was, had been far from straight, and it might well be that Captain Nichols, knowing Kim Ching would not venture to prosecute, had taken more than his fair share of the profits. There was an ugly look in the Chinaman's face. He knew all about Captain Nichols now. He had lost his certificate, there had been some trouble with an insurance company, and since then he had been glad to take employment with owners who were not particular about such things. He had been a heavy drinker till his stomach went back on him. He picked up a living as best he could. He was often on the beach. But he was a first-rate seaman, and he got jobs. He did not keep them long, because it was impossible for him to go straight.

"You tell him he more better get out of here pletty damn quick," said Kim Ching, to finish, breaking into English.

CHAPTER VII

NIGHT had fallen when Dr. Saunders sauntered down once more to Kim Ching's store. Nichols and Blake were sitting there drinking beer. He took them up to the rest-house. The sailor was full of small talk, of a facetious nature, but Fred remained sullen and silent. Dr. Saunders was conscious that he came against his will. When he entered the living-room of the bungalow he gave a quick, suspicious look round as though he awaited he did not quite know what, and when the house ghekkko gave its sudden harsh cry he started suddenly.

"It's only a lizard," said Dr. Saunders.

"It made me jump."

Dr. Saunders called Ah Kay, his boy, and told him to bring the whisky and some glasses.

"I daren't drink it," said the skipper. "It's poison to me. How would you like never to be able to eat a thing or drink a thing, without knowin' you was goin' to suffer for it?"

"Let me see what I can do for you," said Dr. Saunders.

He went to his medicine chest and mixed something in a glass. He gave it to the captain and told him to swallow it.

"Maybe that'll help you to eat your dinner in comfort."

He poured out whisky for himself and Fred Blake and turned on the gramophone. The young man listened to the record and his expression grew more alert; when it was finished he put on another himself and, slightly swaying to the rhythm, stood looking at the instrument. He stole one or two glances at the doctor, but the doctor pretended not to notice him. Captain Nichols, his shifty eyes never still, carried on the conversation. It consisted chiefly of enquiries about this man and that in Fu-chou, Shanghai and Hong-Kong, and descriptions of the drunken parties he had been on in those parts. Ah Kay brought in the dinner and they sat down.

"I enjoy my food," said the captain. "Not fallals, mind you. I like it good and I like it simple. Not a big eater. I never been that. A cut off the joint and a couple of veges, with a bit of cheese to finish up with, and I'm satisfied. You couldn't eat anything simpler than that, could you? And then twenty minutes after—as regular as clockwork—agony. I tell you life ain't worth livin' when you suffer like what I do. D'you ever know old George Vaughan? One of the best. He was on one of the Jardine boats, used to go up to Amoy, he 'ad dyspepsia so bad he 'anged himself. I shouldn't be surprised if I didn't, too, one of these days."

Ah Kay was not a bad cook, and Fred Blake did full justice to the dinner.

"This is a treat after what we've had to eat on the lugger."

"Most of it comes out of a tin, but the boy flavours it up. The Chinese are natural-born cooks."

"It's the best dinner I've had for five weeks."

Dr. Saunders remembered that they had said they had come from Thursday Island. With the fine weather they admitted that could not have taken them more than a week.

"What sort of a place is Thursday Island?" he asked.

It was the captain who answered.

"Hell of a place. Nothin' but goats. The wind blows six months one way and then it blows six months the other. Gets on your nerves."

Captain Nichols spoke with a twinkle in his eyes as though he saw what was at the back of the doctor's simple question and was amused at the easy way he tackled it.

"Do you live there?" Dr. Saunders asked the young man, a guileless smile on his lips.

"No, Brisbane," he answered abruptly.

"Fred's got a bit of capital," said Captain Nichols, "and 'e thought he'd like to 'ave a look-see on the chance 'e might find somethin' in these parts 'e'd like to invest it in. My idea, that was. You see, I know all these islands inside out, and what I say is, there's a rare lot of chances for a young fellow with a bit of capital. That's what I'd do if I 'ad a bit of capital, buy a plantation in one of these islands."

"Do a bit of pearl fishing, too," said Blake.

"You can get all the labour you want. Native labour's the only thing. Then you sit back and let other people work for you. Fine life, too. Grand thing for a young fellow."

The skipper's shifty eyes, for a moment still, were fixed on Dr. Saunders's bland face, and it was not hard to see that he was watching the effect of what he was saying. The doctor felt that they had concocted the story between them that afternoon. And when the skipper saw that Dr. Saunders did not swallow it, he grinned cheerfully. It was as if he took so much delight in lying that it would have spoilt it for him if you had accepted it as the truth.

"That's why we put in 'ere," he went on. "There's not much about these islands that old Kim Ching don't know, and it struck me we might do business with 'im. I told the boy in the store to tell the old fellow I was 'ere."

"I know. He told me."

"You seen 'im, then? Did 'e say anythin' about me?"

"Yes, he said you'd better get out of here pretty damn quick."

"Why, what's 'e got against me?"

"He didn't say."

"We 'ad a bit of a disagreement, I know that, but that was donkey's years ago. There's no sense in 'oldin' a thing up against a fellow all that while. Forgive and forget, I say."

Captain Nichols had the unusual trait that he could play a mean trick on a man without bearing him any ill-feeling afterwards, and he could not understand that the injured party might continue to harbour malice. Dr. Saunders noticed the idiosyncrasy with amused detachment.

"My impression is that Kim Ching has a good memory," he said.

They talked of one thing and another.

"Do you know," said the captain suddenly, "I don't believe I'm goin' to 'ave dyspepsia to-night. Say, what was that stuff you give me?"

"A little preparation that I've found useful in chronic cases like yours."

"I wish you'd give me some more of it."

"It mightn't do you any good next time. What you want is treatment."

"Do you think you could cure me?"

The doctor saw his opportunity coming.

"I don't know about that. If I could watch you for a few days and try one or two things, I might be able to do something for you."

"I've got a good mind to stay on 'ere for a bit and let you see. We're in no 'urry."

"What about Kim Ching?"

"What can 'e do?"

"Come off it," said Fred Blake. "We don't want to get into any trouble here. We're sailing to-morrow."

"It's all right for you to talk. You don't suffer like what I do. Look 'ere, I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll go and see the old devil to-morrow and find out what 'e's got against me."

"We're sailing to-morrow," repeated the other.

"We're sailin' when I say we sail."

The two men looked at one another for an instant. The skipper smiled with his usual foxy geniality, but Fred Blake frowned with sullen anger. Dr. Saunders interrupted the quarrel that was in the air.

"I don't suppose you know Chinamen as well as I do, Captain, but you must know something about them. If they've got their knife into you they're not going to let you off for the asking."

The skipper thumped his fist on the table.

"Well, it was only a matter of a couple of 'undred quid. Old Kim's as rich as be damned. What difference can that make to 'im? He's an old crook, anyway."

"Have you never noticed that nothing hurts the feelings of a crook so much as to have another crook do the dirty on him?"

Captain Nichols wore a moody scowl. His little greenish eyes, set too close together, seemed to converge as he shot a bitter glance into space. He looked a very ugly customer. But at the doctor's remark he threw back his head and laughed.

"That's a good one. 'I like you, Doc, you don't mind what you say, do you? Well, it takes all sorts to make a world. Keep your eyes skinned and let the devil take the 'indmost, that's what I say. And when you see a chance of makin' a bit you're a fool if you don't take it. Of course everyone makes a mistake now and again. But you can't always tell beforehand 'ow things are goin' to turn out."

"If the doctor gives you some more of that stuff and tells you what to do, you'll be all right," said Blake.

He had recovered his temper.

"No, I won't do that," said Dr. Saunders. "But I'll tell you what: I'm fed up with this God-forsaken island and I want to get out; if you'll give me a passage on the lugger to Timor or Macassar or Surabaya, you shall have all the treatment you want."

"That's an idea," said Captain Nichols.

"A damned rotten one," cried the other.

"Why?"

"We can't carry passengers."

"We can sign 'im on."

"There's no accommodation."

"I guess the doctor ain't particular."

"Not a bit. I'll bring my own food and drink. I'll get a lot of canned stuff at Kim Ching's, and he's got plenty of beer."

"Nothing doing," said Blake.

"Look 'ere, young feller-me-lad, who gives orders on this boat, you or me?"

"Well, if it comes down to brass tacks, I do."

"Put that out of your 'ead at once, my lad. I'm skipper and what I say goes."

"Whose boat is it?"

"You know very well whose boat it is."

Dr. Saunders watched them curiously. His bright, quick eyes missed nothing. The captain had lost all his geniality and his face was mottled with red. The youth bore a look of thunder. His fists were clenched and his head thrust forward.

"I won't have him on the boat, and that's that," he cried.

"Oh, come on," said the doctor, "it's not going to hurt you. It'll only be for five or six days. Be a sport. If you won't take me I shall have to stay here God knows how long."

"That's your look-out."

"What have you got against me?"

"That's my business."

Dr. Saunders gave him a questioning glance. Blake was not only angry, he was nervous. His handsome, sullen face was pale. It was curious that he should be so disinclined to let him come on the lugger. In these seas people made no bones about that sort of thing. Kim Ching had said they carried no cargo, but it might be the sort of cargo that did not take up much space and was easily hidden. Neither morphine nor cocaine took up a great deal of room, and there was a lot of money to be made if you could take them to the right places.

"You'd be doing me a great favour," he said gently.

"I'm sorry; I don't want to seem a rotten sport, but me and Nichols are here on business, and we can't go out of our way to land a passenger in some place we don't want to go to."

"I've known the doctor for twenty years," said Nichols. "He's all right."

"You never set eyes on him till this morning."

"I know all about 'im." The captain grinned, showing his broken, discoloured little teeth, and Dr. Saunders reflected that he should have them out. "And if what I 'ear is true 'e ain't got much on any of us."

He gave the doctor a shrewd look. It was interesting to see the hardness behind his genial smile. The doctor bore the glance without flinching. You could not have told if the shaft had gone home or if he had no notion of what the skipper was talking.

"I don't bother myself much with other people's concerns," he smiled.

"Live and let live, I say," said the captain, with the amiable toleration of the scamp.

"When I say no, I mean no," answered the young man obstinately.

"Oh, you make me tired," said Nichols. "There ain't nothin' to be scared about."

"Who says I'm scared?"

"I do."

"I've got nothing to be scared about."

They flung the short sentences at one another quickly. Their exasperation was increasing. Dr. Saunders wondered what the secret was that lay between them. It had evidently more to do with Fred Blake than with Nichols. For once the rascal had nothing on his conscience. He reflected that Captain Nichols was not the sort

of man who would make it easy for anyone whose secret he knew. He could not exactly tell why, but he had an impression that, whatever it was, Captain Nichols did not know but only suspected it. The doctor, however, was very anxious to get on the lugger, and he did not mean to give up the project before he need. It amused him to exercise a certain astuteness to gain his end.

"Look here, I don't want to cause a quarrel between you two. If Blake doesn't want me, let's say no more about it."

"But I want you," retorted the skipper. "It's a chance in a million for me. If there's a man alive as can put my digestion right, it is you, and d'you think I'm goin' to miss an opportunity like that? Not 'alf."

"You think too much 'about your digestion," said Blake. "That's my belief. If you just ate what you wanted to and didn't bother, you'd be all right."

"Oh, should I? I suppose you know more about me digestive apparatus than what I do. I suppose you know when a bit of dry toast sits on me stomach like a ton of lead. I suppose you'll say it's all fancy next."

"Well, if you ask me, I think fancy's got a damned sight more to do with it than you think."

"You son of a bitch."

"Who are you calling a son of a bitch?"

"I'm calling you a son of a bitch."

"Oh, shut up," said the doctor.

Captain Nichols gave a loud belch.

"Now the bastard's brought it on again. It's three months if it's a day that I was able to sit down after supper and feel comfortable, and now he's brought it on again. An upset like this is the death of me. Flies to me stomach at once. I'm a bundle of nerves. Always 'ave been. I thought I was goin' to 'ave a pleasant evenin' for once, and now he's gone and ruined it. I've got dyspepsia somethin' cruel."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said the doctor.

"They all say the same thing; they all say: Captain, you're a bundle of nerves. Delicate? You're more delicate than a child."

Dr. Saunders was gravely sympathetic.

"It's as I suspected, you want watching; your stomach wants educating. If I'd been coming with you on the lugger I should have made it my business to teach your digestive juices to function in a proper manner. I don't say I could have effected a cure

in six or seven days, but I could have put you on the way."

"But who says you're not comin' on the lugger?"

"Blake does, and from what I gather he's the boss."

"Oh, do you? Well, you're mistaken. I'm skipper, and what I say goes. Get your kit packed and come on board to-morrow mornin'. I'll sign you on as a member of the crew."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Blake, jumping to his feet. "I've got as much say as you have, and I say he's not coming. I won't have anyone on the lugger, and that's that."

"Oh, won't you? And what'll you say if I run her straight up to B.N.B.? British territory, young feller-me-lad."

"You take care an accident doesn't happen to you."

"D'you think I'm scared of you? D'you think I've knocked about all over the world since before you was born without knowin' ~~ow~~ to take care of meself? Stick a knife in me back, would you? And who's goin' to sail the boat? You and them four black niggers? You make me laugh. Why, you don't know one end of the boat from the other."

Blake clenched his hands again. The two men glared at one another, but in the captain's eyes was a mocking sneer. He knew that when it came to a show-down he held the cards. A little sigh escaped the other.

"Where d'you want to go?" he asked the doctor.

"Any Dutch island where I can get a ship that'll take me on my way."

"All right, come on, then. Anyway, it'll be better than being cooped up alone with that all the time."

He gave the skipper a glance of impotent hatred. Captain Nichols laughed good-naturedly.

"That's true, it'll be company for you, me boy. We're getting off about ten to-morrow. That suit you?"

"Suit me A1," said the doctor.

CHAPTER VIII

His guests left early and Dr. Saunders, taking his book, lay down in a long, rattan chair. He glanced at his watch. It was a little after nine. It was his habit to smoke half a dozen pipes of an evening. He liked to begin at ten. He waited for this moment, not

with *malaise*, but with a little tremor of anticipation which was pleasant; and he would not cut this short by advancing the hour of his indulgence.

He called Ah Kay and told him that they were sailing in the morning on the strangers' lugger. The boy nodded. He, too, was glad to get away. Dr. Saunders had engaged him when he was thirteen, and now he was nineteen. He was a slim, comely youth with large black eyes and a skin as smooth as a girl's. His hair, coal-black and cut very short, fitted his head like a close cap. His oval face was of the colour of old ivory. He was quick to smile, and then he showed two rows of the most exquisite teeth possible, small and white and regular. In his short Chinese trousers of white cotton and the tight jacket without a collar he had a languorous elegance that was strangely touching. He moved silently and his gestures had the deliberate grace of a cat. Dr. Saunders sometimes flattered himself with the thought that Ah Kay regarded him with affection.

At ten, closing his book, he called:

"Ah Kay!"

The boy came in and Dr. Saunders watched him placidly as he took from a table the little tray on which were the oil lamp, the needle, the pipe and the round tin of opium. The boy put it down on the floor by the doctor, and himself squatting on his haunches lit the lamp. He held the needle in the flame, and with the warm end extracted a sufficiency from the tin of opium; with deft fingers he made it into a ball and delicately cooked it over the little yellow flame. Dr. Saunders watched it sizzle and swell. The boy withdrew it from the flame, kneaded the pellet again and cooked it once more; he inserted it into the pipe and handed it to his master. The doctor took it and with the strong quick pull of the practised smoker inhaled the sweet-tasting smoke. He held it for a minute in his lungs and then slowly exhaled it. He handed the pipe back. The boy scraped it out and put it on the tray. He warmed the needle again and began to cook another pellet. The doctor smoked a second pipe and a third. The boy rose from the floor and went into the cook-house. He came back with a little pot of jasmine tea and poured it into a Chinese bowl. The fragrance for an instant overpowered the acrid odour of the drug. The doctor lay back in his long chair, his head against a cushion and looked at the ceiling. They did not speak. It was very silent in the compound, and the only sound that broke the stillness was the sharp

cry of a ghekkō. The doctor watched it as it stood still on the ceiling, a little yellow beast that looked like a prehistoric monster in miniature, and occasionally made a rapid dart as a fly or a moth caught its attention. Ah Kay lit himself a cigarette, and taking an odd, stringed instrument, something like a banjo, amused himself by playing softly. The thin notes straggled along the air, disconnected sounds they seemed, and if now and then you heard the beginning of a melody, it was not completed and your ear was deceived; it was a slow and plaintive music, as incoherent as the varied scents of flowers, and it seemed to offer you but indications, a hint here and there, the suggestion of a rhythm, with which to create in your own soul a more subtle music than ears could hear. Now and then a sharp discord, like the scratching of a pencil on a slate, assaulted the nerves with a sudden shock. It gave the soul the same delicious tremor as startles the body when in the heat you plunge into an ice-cold pool. The boy sat on the floor in an attitude of unaffected beauty and meditatively plucked the strings of his lute. Dr. Saunders wondered what vague emotions touched him. His melancholy face was impassive. He seemed to be looking into his memory for melodies heard in some long past existence.

Presently the boy looked up, a rapid, charming smile suddenly lighting up his features, and asked his master if he was ready. The doctor nodded. Ah Kay put down his lute and relit the little lamp. He prepared another pipe. The doctor smoked it and two more besides. This was his limit. He smoked regularly, but with moderation. Then he lay back and surrendered himself to his thoughts. Ah Kay now made himself a couple of pipes, and having smoked them put out the lamp. He lay down on a mat with a wooden rest under his neck and presently fell asleep.

But the doctor, exquisitely at peace, considered the riddle of existence. His body rested in the long chair so comfortably that he was not conscious of it except in so far as an obscure sense of well-being in it added to his spiritual relief. In this condition of freedom his soul could look down upon his flesh with the affectionate tolerance with which you might regard a friend who bored you but whose love was grateful to you. His mind was extraordinarily alert, but in its activity there was no restlessness and no anxiety; it moved with an assurance of power, as you might imagine a great physicist would move among his symbols, and his lucidity had the absolute delight of pure beauty. It was an end in itself. He was

lord of space and time. There was no problem that he could not solve if he chose; everything was clear, everything was exquisitely simple; but it seemed foolish to resolve the difficulties of being when there was so delicate a pleasure in knowing that you could completely do so whenever you chose.

CHAPTER IX

DR. SAUNDERS was an early riser. The dawn had but just broken when he went out on his veranda and called Ah Kay. The boy brought his breakfast, the little delicate bananas known as lady's fingers, the inevitable fried eggs, toast and tea. The doctor ate with good appetite. There was little packing to do. Ah Kay's scanty wardrobe went into a brown-paper parcel and the doctor's into a Chinese portmanteau of pale pigskin. The medical stores and the surgical appliances were kept in a tin box of moderate size. Three or four natives were waiting at the foot of the steps that led up to the veranda, patients who wanted to consult the doctor, and he had them up one by one while he ate his breakfast. He told them he was leaving that morning. Then he walked over to Kim Ching's house. It stood in a plantation of coconut trees. It was an imposing bungalow, the largest on the island, with bits and pieces of architecture to give it style, but its pretentiousness contrasted oddly with a sordid environment. It had no garden and the ground round about it, littered with empty tins of preserved food-stuff and fragments of packing-cases, was untended. Chickens, ducks, dogs and pigs wandered about trying to find something to eat among the refuse. It was furnished in the European style, with sideboards of fumed oak, American rockers of the kind you used to see in Middle-Western hotels and occasional tables upholstered in plush. On the walls were enlarged photographs in massive gold frames of Kim Ching and the many members of his family.

Kim Ching was tall and stout, of a dignified presence, and he wore white ducks and a watch-chain of massive gold. He was much pleased with the result of his operation; he could see as he had never expected to, but all the same he would have liked to keep Dr. Saunders on the island a little longer.

"You damn fool to go on that lugger," he said when the doctor told him he was sailing with Captain Nichols. "You velly

comfortable here. Why you no wait? Take it easy an' enjoy yourself. Much more better you wait for Dutch boat. Nichols velly bad man."

"You're not a velly good man yourself, Kim Ching."

The trader, showing a row of expensive gold teeth, greeted this sally with a slow, fat smile in which there was no hint of disagreement. He liked the doctor and was grateful to him. When he saw that there was no persuading him to stay, he ceased to urge it. Dr. Saunders gave him his final instructions and took leave of him. Kim Ching accompanied him to the door and they parted. The doctor went down to the village and bought provisions for the journey, a bag of rice, a bunch of bananas, canned goods, whisky and beer; he told the coolie to take them down to the beach and wait for him, and returned to the rest-house. Ah Kay was ready and one of that morning's patients, willing to earn a trifle, was waiting to carry the luggage. When they came to the beach one of Kim Ching's sons was there to see him off, and he had brought at his father's instructions a roll of Chinese silk as a parting present and a little square packet wrapped in white paper with Chinese characters on it, the contents of which Dr. Saunders guessed.

"Chandu?"

"My father say velly good stuff. P'laps you not have plenty for journey."

There was no sign of life on the lugger, and the dinghy was not to be seen on the beach. Dr. Saunders shouted, but his voice was thin and throaty and did not carry. Ah Kay and Kim Ching's son tried to make someone hear, but in vain, so they put the luggage and the stores into a dug-out and a native paddled the doctor and Ah Kay out. When they came up Dr. Saunders shouted again:

"Captain Nichols."

Fred Blake appeared.

"Oh, it's you. Nichols has gone ashore to get water."

"I didn't see him."

Blake said nothing more. The doctor climbed on board, followed by Ah Kay, and the native handed them up their kit and the provisions.

"Where shall I put my stuff?"

"There's the cabin," said Blake, pointing.

The doctor went down the companion. The cabin was aft. It was so low that you could not stand upright in it, far from spacious, and the main mast went through it. The ceiling was blackened

where a smoking lamp hung. There were small portholes with wooden shutters. The mattresses of Nichols and Fred Blake were lengthways, and the only place for himself that the doctor could see was at the foot of the companion. He went on deck again and told Ah Kay to take down his sleeping mat and his portmanteau.

"The stores had better go in the hold," he said to Fred.

"Fat chance there is for them there. We keep ours in the cabin. Tell your boy he'll find a place under the boards. They're loose."

The doctor looked about him. He knew nothing of the sea. Except on occasion on the Min River, he had never been on anything but a steamer. The lugger looked very small for so long a voyage. It was a little more than fifty feet long. He would have liked to ask Blake several things, but he had gone forward. It was plain that though he had consented to the doctor's coming it was against his will. He was sulking. There were a couple of old canvas chairs on deck, and in one of them the doctor sat down.

In a little while a blackfellow, wearing nothing but a dingy *pareo*, came along. He was of solid build and his crisp curly hair was very grey.

"Captain coming," he said.

Dr. Saunders looked in the direction in which he pointed, and saw the dinghy advancing towards them. Captain Nichols was steering and two blackfellows were rowing. They came alongside and the skipper called out:

"Utan, Tom, give a hand with the casks."

Another blackfellow came up from the hold. The crew consisted of these four, Torres Straits islanders, tall, strong men with fine figures. Captain Nichols climbed on board and shook hands with the doctor.

"Settled in all right, Doc? Not much of the ocean grey'ound about the Fenton, but as good a sea-boat as anyone can want. She'll stand anything."

He gave the dirty, unkempt little craft a sweeping glance in which there was the satisfaction of the workman with the tools he knew how to handle.

"Well, we'll be gettin' off."

He gave his orders sharply. Mainsail and foresail were hoisted, the anchor weighed, and they slipped out of the lagoon. There was not a cloud in the sky, and the sun beat down on the shining sea. The monsoon was blowing, but with no great force, and there was a slight swell. Two or three gulls flew round them in wide circles.

Now and then a flying-fish pierced the surface of the water, made a long dart over it and dived down with a tiny splash. Dr. Saunders read, smoked cigarettes, and when he was tired of reading looked at the sea and the green islands they passed. After a while the skipper handed over the wheel to one of the crew and came and sat down by him.

"We'll anchor at Badu to-night," he said. "That's about forty-five miles. It looks all right in the Sailing Directions. There's an anchorage there."

"What is it?"

"Oh, just an uninhabited island. We generally anchor for the night."

"Blake doesn't seem any more pleased to have me on board," said the doctor.

"We 'ad a bit of an argument last night."

"What's the trouble?"

"He's only a kid."

Dr. Saunders knew that he must earn his passage, and he knew also that when a man has told you all his symptoms he will have gained confidence and will tell you a great deal more besides. He began to ask the skipper questions about his health. There was nothing on which he was prepared to talk at greater length. The doctor took him down into the cabin, made him lie down, and carefully examined him. When they went on deck again the grey-haired blackfellow, Tom Obu by name, who was cook and steward, was bringing aft their dinner.

"Come on, Fred," called the skipper.

They sat down.

"This smells good," said Nichols, as Tom Obu took the lid off the saucepan. "Somethin' new, Tom?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if my boy hadn't lent a hand," said the doctor.

"I think I can eat this," said the skipper as he took a mouthful of a mess of rice and meat that he ladled on to his plate. "What do you think of this, Fred? Seems to me we're goin' to do ourselves O.K. with the doc on board."

"It's better than Tom's cooking, I'll say that for it."

They ate with hearty appetite. The captain lit his pipe.

"If I don't 'ave a pain after this I'll say you're a wonder, Doc."

"You won't have a pain."

"What beats me is 'ow a fellow like you come to settle in

a place like Fu-chou. You could make a fortune in Sydney."

"I'm all right in Fu-chou. I like China."

"Yep? Studied in England, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"I've 'eard tell you was a specialist, 'ad a big practice in London, and I don't know what all."

"You mustn't believe all you hear."

"Seems funny your chuckin' everything and settlin' in a lousy Chinese city. You must 'ave been makin' a packet in London."

The skipper looked at him with his little shifty blue eyes and his grinning face was quick with malice. But the doctor bore his scrutiny blandly. He smiled, showing those large discoloured teeth of his, his eyes shrewd and alert, but gave no sign of embarrassment.

"Ever go back to England?"

"No. Why should I? My home's in Fu-chou."

"I don't blame you. England's finished, if you ask me. Too many rules and regulations for my taste. Why can't they leave a fellow alone? that's what I'd like to know. Not on the register, are you?"

He shot the question out suddenly as though he wished to take the doctor by surprise. But he had met someone who was a match for him.

"Don't say you haven't confidence in me, Captain. You must believe in your doctor. He can't do much for you if you don't."

"Believe in you? Why, if I didn't believe in you you wouldn't be 'ere." Captain Nichols grew deadly serious; this was something that concerned himself. "I know there's no one as is a patch on you anywheres between Bombay and Sydney, and if the truth was only told I shouldn't be surprised if you'd 'ave to go a long way in London before you could find anyone as could 'old a candle to you. I know you've taken every degree a fellow can take. I've 'eard tell as 'ow if you'd stayed in London you'd be a baronet by now."

"I don't mind telling you that I've got more degrees than are any use to me," the doctor laughed.

"Funny you shouldn't be in the book. What's it called? The *Medical Directory*."

"What makes you think I'm not?" murmured the doctor, smiling but wary.

"Fellow I knew in Sydney looked you up. Talkin' about you, 'e

was, to another doctor, pal of 'is, and sayin' you was such a marvel and all that, and out of curiosity they 'ad a look-see."

"Perhaps your friend looked in the wrong edition."

Captain Nichols chuckled slyly.

"Perhaps he did. I never thought of that."

"Anyhow, I've never seen the inside of a gaol, Captain."

The skipper gave a little start. He repressed it at once, but he changed colour. Dr. Saunders had made a shot in the dark and his eyes twinkled. The skipper laughed.

"That's a good one. No more 'ave I, Doc, but don't you forget there's many a man's gone to gaol for no fault of 'is own and there's many a man as might 'ave gone there if he 'adn't thought a change of air would suit him."

They looked at one another and chuckled.

"What's there to laugh about?" said Fred Blake.

CHAPTER X

TOWARD evening they sighted the island where Captain Nichols designed to pass the night, a cone covered to its summit with trees so that it looked like a hill in a picture by Piero della Francesca, and sailing round it they came to the anchorage they had read of in the Sailing Directions. It was a well-sheltered cove and the water was so clear that as you looked over the side you saw on the ocean floor the fantastic efflorescence of the coral. You saw the fish swimming, like natives of the forest threading their familiar way through the jungle. Not a little to their surprise they found a schooner anchored there.

"What's that?" asked Fred Blake.

His eyes were anxious, and indeed it was strange to enter upon that silent cove, protected by the green hill, in the still cool of the evening and see there a sailing vessel. She lay, sails furled, and because the spot was so solitary her presence was vaguely sinister. Captain Nichols looked at her through his glasses.

"She's a pearler. Port Darwin. I don't know what she's doin' 'ere. There's a lot of 'em round by the Aru Islands."

They saw the crew, a white man among them, watching them, and presently a boat was lowered.

"They're comin' over," said the skipper.

By the time they were anchored, the dinghy had rowed up and Captain Nichols exchanged shouts of greeting with the captain of the schooner. He came on board, an Australian, and told them that his Japanese diver was sick and he was on his way to one of the Dutch islands where he could get a doctor.

"We got a doctor on board," said Captain Nichols. "We're givin' 'im a passage."

The Australian asked Dr. Saunders if he would come along and see his sick man, and after they had given him a cup of tea, for he refused a drink, the doctor got into the dinghy.

"Have you got any Australian papers?" asked Fred.

"I've got a *Bulletin*. It's a month old."

"Never mind. It'll be new to us."

"You're welcome to it. I'll send it back by the doctor."

It did not take Dr. Saunders long to discover that the diver was suffering from a severe attack of dysentery. He was very ill. He gave him a hypodermic injection, and told the captain there was nothing to do but keep him quiet.

"Damn these Japs, they've got no constitution. I shan't get any more work out of him for some time then?"

"If ever," said the doctor.

They shook hands and he got into the dinghy again. The black-fellow pushed off.

"Here, wait a bit. I forgot to give you that paper."

The Australian dived into the cabin and in a minute came out again with a *Sydney Bulletin*. He threw it into the dinghy.

† Captain Nichols and Fred were playing cribbage when the doctor climbed back on to the *Fenton*. The sun was setting and the smooth sea was lucid with pale and various colour, blue, green, salmon-pink and milky purple, and it was like the subtle and tender colour of silence.

"Fixed 'im up all right?" enquired the skipper indifferently.

"He's pretty bad."

"Is that the paper?" Fred asked.

He took it out of the doctor's hand, and strolled forwards.

"Play cribbage?" said Nichols.

"No, I don't."

"Me and Fred play it every night. Luck of the devil 'e 'as. I shouldn't like to tell you 'ow much money 'e's won off me. It can't go on. It must turn soon." He called out: "Come on, Fred."

"Half a mo."

The skipper shrugged his shoulders.

"No manners. Anxious to see a paper, wasn't 'e?"

"And a month old one at that," answered the doctor. "How long is it since you left Thursday Island?"

"We never went near Thursday Island."

"Oh!"

"What about a spot? D'you think it'd do me any 'arm?"

"I don't think so."

The skipper shouted for Tom Obu, and the blackfellow brought them a couple of glasses and some water. Nichols fetched the whisky. The sun set and the night crept softly over the still water. The only sound that broke the silence was the leap now and then of a fish. Tom Obu brought a hurricane lamp and placed it on the deck-house, and going below lit the smoking oil-lamp in the cabin.

"I wonder what our young friend is readin' all this time."

"In the dark?"

"Maybe 'e's thinkin' of what 'e 'as read."

But when at last Fred joined them and sat down to finish the interrupted game, it seemed to Dr. Saunders, in the uncertain light, that he was very pale. He had not brought the paper with him and the doctor went forward to get it. He could not see it. He called Ah Kay and told him to look for it. Standing in the darkness he watched the players.

"Fifteen two. Fifteen four. Fifteen six. Fifteen eight and six are fourteen. And one for his nob seventeen."

"God, what luck you 'ave."

The skipper was a bad loser. His face was set and hard. His shifty eyes glanced at each card he turned up with a sneering look. But the other played with a smile on his lips. The light of the hurricane lamp cut his profile out of the darkness, and it was astonishingly fine. His long lashes cast a little shadow on his cheeks. Just then he was more than a handsome young man; he had a tragic beauty that was very moving. Ah Kay came and said he could not find the paper.

"Where did you leave that *Bulletin*, Fred?" asked the doctor. "My boy can't find it."

"Isn't it there?"

"No, we've both looked."

"How the hell should I know where it is? Two for his heels."

"Throw it overboard when you done with it?" asked the captain.

"Me? Why should I throw it overboard?"

"Well, if you didn't it must be somewhere about," said the doctor.

"That's another game to you," the skipper growled. "I never see anyone 'old such cards."

CHAPTER XI

It was between one and two in the morning. Dr. Saunders sat in a deck-chair. The skipper was asleep in the cabin and Fred had taken his mattress forrard. It was very still. The stars were so bright that the shape of the island was very distinctly outlined, against the night. Distance is less an affair of space than of time and though they had gone but five-and-forty miles it seemed to the doctor that Takana was very far away. London was at the other end of the world. He had a fleeting vision of Piccadilly Circus, with its bright lights, the crowd of buses, cars and taxis, and the crowd that surged when the theatres disgorged their audiences. There was a part that in his day they called the Front, the street on the north side that led from Shaftesbury Avenue to the Charing Cross Road, where from eleven to twelve people walked up and down in a serried throng. That was before the war. There was a sense of adventure in the air. Eyes met and then. . . . The doctor smiled. He did not regret the past; he regretted nothing. Then his wandering thoughts hovered over the bridge at Fu-chou, the bridge over the Min River, from which you saw the fisherman in the barges below fishing with cormorants; rickshaws crossed the bridge, and coolies bearing heavy loads, and the innumerable Chinese walked to and fro. On the right bank as you looked downstream was the Chinese City with its crowded houses and its temples. The schooner showed no light and the doctor only saw it in the darkness because he knew that it was there. All was silent on board. But in the hold where the pearl shell was piled, on one of the wooden bunks along the side, lay the dying diver. The doctor attached small value to human life. Who, that had lived so long amid those teeming Chinese where it was held so cheap, could have much feeling about it? He was a Japanese, the diver, and

probably a Buddhist. Transmigration? Look at the sea: wave follows wave, it is not the same wave, yet one causes another and transmits its form and movement. So the beings travelling through the world are not the same to-day and to-morrow, nor in one life the same as in another; and yet it is the urge and the form of the previous lives that determine the character of those that follow. A reasonable belief but an incredible. But was it any more incredible than that so much striving, such a variety of accidents, so many miraculous hazards should have combined, through the long æons of time, to produce from the primeval slime at long last this man who, by means of Flexner's bacillus, was aimlessly snuffed out? Dr. Saunders thought it odd, but natural, senseless certainly, but he had long made himself at home in the futility of things. Of course the spirit was a difficulty. Did that cease to exist when the matter which was its instrument dissolved? In that lovely night, his thoughts flowing without purpose, like birds, sea-gulls, wheeling over the sea, rising and falling as the wind took them, he could not but keep an open mind.

There was the sound of shuffling steps on the companion and the skipper appeared. The stripe of his pyjamas was bold enough to tell against the darkness.

"Captain?"

"It's me. I thought I'd come up for a breath of air." He sank into the chair by the doctor's side. "Had your smoke?"

"Yes."

"I've never took to it meself. I've known a good many as did, though. Never seemed to do 'em much 'arm. Settles the stomach, they say. One fellow I knew went all to pieces. Skipper of one of Butterfield's boats on the Yang-tze at one time. Good position and everything. They thought a rare lot of 'im. Sent him 'ome once to get cured, but 'e took to it again the moment 'e come back. Ended up as a tout for a fantan 'ouse. Used to 'ang about the docks at Shanghai and cadge 'alf-dollars."

They were silent for a while. Captain Nichols sucked a briar pipe.

"Seen anythin' of Fred?"

"He's sleeping on deck."

"Funny thing about that paper. He didn't want you and me to read somethin'."

"What d'you suppose he did with it?"

"Dropped it overboard."

"What's it all about?"

The skipper gave a low chuckle.

"Believe me, or believe me not, I don't know any more than you do."

"I've lived in the East long enough to know that it's better to mind my own business."

But the skipper was inclined to be confidential. His digestion was not troubling him and after three or four hours of good sleep he felt very wide awake.

"There's somethin' fishy about it, I know that, but I'm like you, Doc, I'm all for mindin' me own business. Ask no questions an' you'll be told no lies. That's what I say, an' if you get a chance of makin' a bit of money, take it quick." The skipper gave his pipe a pull. "You won't let this go any further, will you?"

"Not on your life."

"Well, it's like this. I was in Sydney. I 'adn't 'ad a job for the best part of two years. And not for the want of tryin', mind you. Just bad luck. First-rate seaman I am and got a lot of experience. Steam or sail, I don't mind what it is. You'd think they'd jump at me. But no. I'm a married man too. Things got so bad my old woman 'ad to go into service, I didn't 'alf like it, I can tell you, but there, I just 'ad to lump it. I 'ad a roof over me 'ead and three meals a day, she give me that all right, but when it come to lettin' me 'ave 'alf a dollar to go to the pictures and get one or two drinks, no, sir. An' nag. Never been married, 'ave you?"

"No."

"Well, I don't blame you. They're near, you know. Women can't bear partin' with their money. I been married twenty years, and it's been nag, nag, nag all the time. Very superior woman, my missus, that's what begun the trouble, she thought she demeaned 'erself by marryin' me. Her father was a big draper up in Liverpool, and she never let me forget it. She blamed me because I couldn't get a job. Said I liked bein' on the beach. Lazy, idle loafer she called me and she said she was fair sick of workin' 'erself to the bone to give me board and lodgin' and if I didn't get a billet soon I could just get out and shift for meself. I give you my word, sometimes I just 'ad to 'old on to meself like grim death not to give her a sock on the jaw, lady though she was, and no one knows that better than what I do. D'you know Sydney?"

"No, I've never been there."

"Well, one night I was just standin' around in a bar down by the

'arbour I used to go to sometimes. I 'adn't, 'ad a drink all day, and I was just parched; my dyspepsia was somethin' awful, and I was feelin' pretty low. I 'adn't got a penny in me pocket, me what's commanded more ships than you can count on the fingers of your two 'ands, and I couldn't go 'ome. I knew the missus'd start on me, and she'd give me a bit of cold mutton for me supper, though she knows it's the death of me, and she'd go on and on, always the lady, if you know what I mean, but just nasty, cuttin' and superior-like, never raisin' her voice, but not a minute's peace. An' if I was to lose me temper and tell 'er to go to hell, she'd just draw 'erself up and say: 'None of your foul language 'ere, Captain, if you please. I may 'ave married a common sailor, but I will be treated like a lady.' "

Captain Nichols lowered his voice and leant over in a very confidential manner.

"Now this is quite *infra dig.*, you know what I mean, just between you and me: you don't know where you are with women. They don't behave like 'uman beings. Would you believe it, I've run away from 'er four times. You would think a woman'd see what you meant after that, wouldn't you?"

"You would."

"But no. Every time she's followed me. Of course, once she knew where I'd gone, and it was easy, but the others she didn't know any more than the man in the moon. I'd 'ave bet every penny I 'ad in the world that she wouldn't find me. Like lookin' for a needle in a bundle of 'ay, it was. An' then one day she'd walk up, quite cool, as if she seen me the day before, and not a 'owd'you-do or a fancy seein' you or anythin' like that, but: 'You want a shave if you ask me, Captain,' or: 'Them trousers of yours is a disgrace, Captain.' . . . I don't care who it is, it's the kind of thing to break anyone's nerve."

Captain Nichols was silent and his eyes swept the empty sea. In that lucid night you saw quite clearly the thin sharp line of the horizon.

"This time I been an' gone an' done the trick, and I 'ave got away from 'er. She don't know where I am and she can't find out, but I give you my word I wouldn't be surprised if she was to come rowin' over that sea in a dinghy, all neat and tidy, she's always the lady to look at, I will say that for 'er, and come on board and just say to me: 'What's that nasty, filthy tobacco you're smokin', Captain? You know, I can't abide anythin' but Player's Navy Cut.' "

It's me nerves. That's what's at the bottom of my dyspepsia, if the truth was only known. I remember, once I went to see a doctor in Singapore as 'ad been very strongly recommended to me and 'e wrote a lot of stuff in a book, you know 'ow doctors do, and he put a cross down. Well, I didn't 'alf like the look of that, so I said to 'im: 'I say, Doctor,' I says, 'what's that cross mean?' 'Oh,' he says, 'I always put a cross when I 'ave reason to suspect domestic unpleasantness.' 'Oh, I see,' I says; 'well, you've 'it the nail on the 'ead, Doctor; I bear a cross all right.' Clever fellow 'e was, but 'e never done my dyspepsia much good."

"Socrates suffered from the same sort of affliction, Captain, but I never heard that it affected his digestion."

"Who was 'e?"

"An honest man."

"Much good it did 'im, I lay."

"In point of fact, it didn't."

"You've got to take things as you find 'em, I say, and if you're too particular you won't get anywhere."

Dr. Saunders laughed in his heart. It appealed to his sense of humour to think of this mean and unscrupulous blackguard in abject terror of his wife. It was the triumph of spirit over matter. He wondered what she looked like.

"I was tellin' you about Fred Blake," the skipper continued, after a pause to relight his pipe. "Well, as I was sayin', I was in that bar. I said good-evenin' to one or two chaps, cordial like, you know, and they said good-evenin' to me and looked the other way. You could see them just sayin' to theirselves: There's that bum ag'ain, cadgin' around for drinks; 'e ain't goin' to get one out of me. You can't wonder I was feelin' pretty low. Humiliating, that's what it was, for a man as 'ad been in a good position like what I 'ave. It's terrible 'ow near a fellow can be with 'is money when he knows you ain't got none. The boss give me a dirty look and I 'alf thought he was going to ask me what I'd 'ave, and then when I said I'd wait a bit, 'e'd say, well, I'd better wait outside. I began talkin' to one or two chaps I didn't know, but they wasn't what you'd call cordial. I cracked a joke or two, but I couldn't get 'em laughin', and they made it pretty plain that I was buttin' in. And then I saw a fellow come in I knew. Big bully of a chap. What they call a larrikin in Australia. Name of Ryan. You 'ad to keep in with 'im. He 'ad something to do with politics. Always 'ad plenty of money. He lent me five bob once. Well, I didn't think 'e'd want to see me,

so I pretended I didn't recognise 'im and just went on talkin'. But I was watchin' 'im out of the corner of me eye. He looked round and then 'e come right up to me.

" 'Good-evenin', Captain,' he says, very friendly like. 'How's the world been treatin' you these days?'

" 'Rotten,' I says.

" 'Still lookin' for a job?'

" 'Yes,' I says.

" 'What'll you 'ave?' he says.

"I 'ad a beer and 'e 'ad a beer. It pretty near saved my life. But you know, I'm not much of a one for believin' in miracles. I wanted that beer pretty bad, but I knew just as well as I know I'm talkin' to you that Ryan wasn't givin' it me for nothin'. He's one of them 'earties, you know; slaps you on the back and laughs at your jokes as though he'd fair bust, and it's ' 'Ullo, where 'ave you been 'idin' yourself?' and, 'My missus is a grand little woman and you should see my kiddies,' and all that; and then all the time 'e's watchin' you and 'is eyes look right through you. It takes in the mugs. 'Good old Ryan,' they say; 'one of the best.' There are no flies on me, Doc. You don't catch me so easy as that. And while I was drinkin' my beer I said to myself: 'Now, then, old boy, you keep your eyes skinned. He wants something.' But of course I didn't let on. I told 'im a yarn or two and 'e just laughed 'is 'ead off.

" 'You're a caution, Captain,' 'e said; 'great old sport, that's what you are. Finish your beer and we'll 'ave another. I could listen to you talkin' all night.'

"Well, I finished my beer and I saw 'e was goin' to order another.

" 'Look 'ere, Bill,' he says: well, my name's Tom, but I didn't say nothing. I saw 'e was tryin' to be friendly. 'Look 'ere, Bill,' he says, 'there's too many people round 'ere, one simply can't 'ear oneself talk, and you never know who's listenin' to what you say. I'll tell you what we'll do.' He called the boss. 'Look 'ere, George, come 'ere a minute.' And up he comes with a run. 'Look 'ere, George, me and my friend we want to 'ave a little quiet yarn about old times. What about that room of yours?'

" 'My office? All right. You can go in there if you want to, and welcome.'

" 'That's the ticket. And you bring us a couple of beers.

"Well, we walks round and we goes into the office, and George

brings us a couple of beers 'imself. In person; gives me a nod, 'e does. And George goes out. Ryan shut the door after 'im and 'e looked at the window to see it was shut all right. Said 'e couldn't stand a draught at any price. I didn't know what 'e was after, and I thought I'd better get straight with 'im at once.

" 'Look 'ere, Ryan,' I says; 'I'm sorry about that five bob you lent me. It's been on me mind ever since, but the truth is I've 'ad all I can do just to keep body and soul together.'

" 'Forget it,' he says. 'What's five bob? I know you're all right. You're a fine feller, Bill. What's the good of 'avin' money if you can't lend it to a pal when 'e's down on his luck?'

" 'Well, I'd do the same by you, Ryan,' says I, takin' my cue from 'im. To listen to us you'd 'ave thought us a pair of brothers."

Captain Nichols chuckled as he recalled the scene they had played. He took an artist's delight in his own rascality,

" 'Chin, chin,' says I.

" 'We both 'ad a drink of beer. 'Now look 'ere, Bill,' says 'e, wipin' 'is mouth with the back of 'is 'and, 'I been makin' enquiries about you. Good seaman and all that, ain't you?' 'None better,' says I. 'If you ain't 'ad a job for some time I reckon it's more by bad luck than bad management.' 'That's right,' says I. 'Now I'm going to give you a surprise, Bill,' says 'e. 'I'm going to offer you a job meself.' 'I'll take it,' says I. 'No matter what it is.' 'That's the spirit,' says 'e. 'I knew I could count on you.'

" 'Well, what is it?' I ask 'im.

" 'He give me a look, and though 'e was smilin' at me as if I was his long lost brother and 'e loved me like anything, 'e was lookin' at me pretty 'ard. It was no jokin' matter, I could see that.

" 'Can you keep your mouth shut?' 'e asks me.

" 'Like a clam,' says I.

" 'That's good,' says 'e. 'Now what d'you say to takin' a tidy little pearling lugger, you know, one of them ketches they 'ave at Thursday Island and Port Darwin, and cruisin' about the islands for a few months?'

" 'Sounds all right to me,' I says.

" 'Well, that's the job.'

" 'Tradin'?' I says.

" 'No, just pleasure.' "

Captain Nichols sniggered.

"I nearly laughed outright when 'e said that, but one 'as to be careful, lot of people 'ave no sense of humour, so I just looked as

grave as a judge. He give me another look and I could see 'e could be an ugly customer if you put 'is back up.'

" 'I'll tell you 'ow it is,' 'e says. 'Young fellow I know been workin' too 'ard. His dad's an old pal of mine, and I'm doin' this to please 'im, see? He's a man in a very good position. Got a lot of influence in one way and another.'

"He 'ad another drink of beer. I kep' me eyes on 'im, but I never said a word. Not a syllable.

" 'The old man's in a rare state. Only kid, you know. Well, I know what it is with me own kids. If one of 'em gets a pain in 'is big toe, I'm upset for the day.'

" 'You don't 'ave to tell me,' I says. 'I got a daughter meself.'

" 'Only child?' he says.

"I nodded.

" 'Grand thing, children,' he says. 'Nothin' like 'em to bring 'appiness in a man's life.'

" 'You're right there,' I says.

" 'Always delicate, this boy's been,' 'e says, shakin' 'is 'ead. 'Got a touch of the lungs. The doctors say the best thing 'e can do is to 'ave a cruise on a sailin' ship. Well, 'is dad didn't 'alf like the idea of 'is takin' a passage on any old ship and 'e 'eard of this 'ere ketch and 'e bought her. You see, like that, you're not tied down and you can go anywhere. Nice easy life, that's what 'e wants the boy to 'ave; I mean, you don't 'ave to 'urry. You choose your own weather an' when you get to some island what looks like you could stay there for a bit, why, you just stay. There's dozens of them islands up between Australia and China, they tell me.'

" 'Thousands,' says I.

" 'An' the boy's got to be kep' quiet. Essential, that is. His dad wants you to keep away from where there's a lot of people.'

" 'That's all right,' says I, lookin' as innocent as a new-born babe. 'And 'ow long for?'

" 'I don't exactly know,' says he. 'Depends on the boy's 'ealth. Two or three months, maybe, or maybe a year.'

" 'I see,' says I; 'and what do I get out of it?'

" 'Two 'undred quid when your passenger comes on board, and two 'undred quid when you comes back.'

" 'Make it five 'undred down and I'm game,' says I. He never says a thing, but 'e give me a dirty look. And 'e just shoved his jaw out at me. My word, 'e looked a beauty. If there's one thing I got it's tact. He could make things pretty unpleasant for me if 'e

wanted to. I knew that, and I 'ad a feeling that if I didn't take care 'e would want to. So I just shrugged me shoulders, careless like, and laughed. 'Oh, well, I don't care about the money,' I says. 'Money means nothin' to me, never 'as. If it 'ad I'd be one of the richest men in Australia to-day. I'll take what you say. Anythin' to oblige a friend.'

" 'Good old Bill,' says 'e.

" 'Where's the ketch now?' says I. 'I'd like to go and 'ave a look at her.'

" 'Oh, she's all right. Friend of mine just brought her down from Thursday Island to sell 'er. She's in grand shape. She ain't in Sydney. She's up the coast a few miles.'

" 'What about a crew?'

" 'Niggers from Torres Straits. They brought 'er down. All you've got to do is to get on board and sail away.'

" 'When would you want me to sail?'

" 'Now.'

" 'Now?' says I, surprised. 'Not to-night?'

" 'Yes, to-night. I got a car waitin' down the street. I'll drive you over to where she's lying.'

" 'What's the 'urry?' I says, smiling, but giving 'im a look as much as to say I thought it damned fishy.

" 'The boy's dad's a big business man. Always does things like that.'

" 'Politician?' says I.

" 'I was beginning to put two and two together, so to speak.

" 'My aunt,' says Ryan.

" 'But I'm a married man,' says I. 'If I just go off like this without sayin' so much as a word to nobody, my old woman'll be makin' enquiries all over the place. She'll want to know where I am and when she can't find nobody to tell her she'll go to the police.'

" 'He looked at me pretty sharp when I said this. I knew he didn't 'alf like the idea of 'er goin' to the police.

" 'It'll look funny, a master mariner disappearin' like this. I mean, it ain't like as if I was a blackfellow or a Kanaka. Of course I don't know if there's anyone 'as reason to be inquisitive. There's a lot of nousey-parkers about, especially just now with the election comin' on.'

" 'I couldn't 'elp thinkin' I got a good one in there, about the election, but 'e didn't let on a thing. His great ugly face might 'a' been a blank wall.

" 'I'll go and see 'er meself,' 'e said.

"I 'ad me own game to play, too, and I wasn't goin' to let a chance like this pass me by.

" 'Tell 'er the first mate of a steamer broke his neck just as she was going out and they took me on and I didn't 'ave time to go 'ome and she'll 'ear from me next from Cape Town.'

" 'That's the ticket,' says 'e.

" 'An' if she kicks up a racket give 'er a passage to Cape Town and a five-pound note. That's not askin' much.'

"He laughed then, honest, and 'e said 'e'd do it.

"He finished 'is beer and I finished mine.

" 'Now then,' says 'e, 'if you're ready we'll be startin'.' He looked at 'is watch. 'You meet me at the corner of Market Street in 'alf an hour. I'll drive by in my car and you just jump in. You go out first. No need for you to go out by the bar. There's a door at the end of the passage. You take that and you'll find yourself in the street.'

" 'O.K.,' says I, and I takes me 'at.

" 'There's just one thing I'd like to say to you,' 'e says, as I was going. 'An' this refers to now and later. If you don't want a knife in your back or a bullet in your guts you better not try no monkey tricks. See?'

"He said it quite pleasant, but I'm no fool, and I knew 'e meant it.

" 'Don't you 'ave no fear,' says I. 'When a chap treats me like a gentleman, I behave like one.' Then very casual like: 'Young feller on board, I suppose?'

" 'No, 'e ain't. Comin' on board later.'

"I walked out and I got into the street. I walked along to where he said. It was only a matter of two 'undred yards. I thought to meself if 'e wanted me to wait there for 'alf an hour it was because he 'ad to go and see someone and say what 'ad 'appened. I couldn't 'elp wonderin' what the police'd say if I told 'em somethin' funny was up and it'd be worth their while to follow the car and 'ave a look at this ketch. But I thought p'raps it wouldn't be worth my while. It's all very well to do a public duty, and I don't mind bein' in well with the cops any more than anyone else does, but it wouldn't do me much good if I got a knife in me belly for me pains. And there was no four 'undred quid to be got out of them. P'raps it's just as well I didn't try any 'anky-panky on with Ryan, because I see a chap on the other side of the street, standin' in the shadow as if 'e didn't want no one to see 'im, and it looked to me

as if 'e was watchin' me. I walked over to 'ave a look at 'im and 'e walked away when he 'saw me comin', then I walked back again and he come and stood just where 'e was before. Funny. It was all damned funny. The thing what grizzled me was that Ryan 'adn't shown more confidence in me. If you're goin' to trust a man, trust 'im, that's what I say. I want you to understand I didn't mind its bein' funny. I seen a lot of funny things in my day and I take 'em as they come."

Dr. Saunders smiled. He began to understand Captain Nichols. He was a man who found the daily round of honest life a trifle humdrum. He needed a spice of crookedness to counteract the depression his dyspepsia caused him. His blood ran faster, he felt better in health, his vitality was heightened when his fingers dabbled in crime. The alertness he must then exercise to protect himself from harm took his mind off the processes of his lamentable digestion. If Dr. Saunders was somewhat lacking in sympathy, he made up for it by being uncommonly tolerant. He thought it no business of his to praise or condemn. He was able to recognise that one was a saint and another a villain, but his consideration of both was fraught with the same cool detachment.

"I couldn't 'elp laughin' as I thought of meself standin' there," continued the skipper, "and startin' off on a cruise without so much as a change of clothes, me shavin' tackle or a toothbrush. You wouldn't find many men as'd be prepared to do that and not give a tinker's cuss."

"You wouldn't," said the doctor.

"And then I thought of the face my old woman'd make when Ryan told 'er I'd sailed. I can just see 'er toddlin' off to Cape Town by the next ship. She'll never find me no more. This time I 'ave got away from her. And who'd 'ave thought it'd come like that just when I was thinkin' I couldn't stand another day of it. If it wasn't Providence, I don't know what it was."

"It's ways are always said to be inscrutable."

"Don't I know it? Brought up a Baptist, I was. 'Not a sparrow shall fall——' you know 'ow it goes. I seen it come true over and over again. And then after I'd been waitin' there a bit, a good 'alf hour, a car come along and stops just by me. 'Jump in,' says Ryan, and off we go. The roads are terrible bad round Sydney and we was bumpin' up and down like a cork in the water. Pretty fast he drove.

" 'What about stores and all that?' I says to Ryan.

" 'It's all on board,' 'e says. 'You got epough to last you three months.'

" 'I didn't know where 'e was goin'. Dark night and I couldn't see a thing; it must 'ave been gettin' on for midnight.

" 'Here we are,' 'e says, and stops. 'Get out.'

" 'I got out and 'e got out after me. He turns off 'is lights. I knew we was pretty near the sea, but I couldn't see a yard in front of me. He 'ad an electric torch.

" 'You follow me,' 'e says, 'an' look where you're goin'.'

" 'We walked a bit. A sort of pathway there was. I'm pretty nimble on me feet, but I nearly come arse over tip two or three times. 'Nice thing if I break my bloody leg goin' down 'ere,' I says to meself. I wasn't 'alf glad when we come to the bottom and I felt the beach under me feet. You could see the water, but you couldn't see nothin' else. Ryan give a whistle. Someone on the water shouted, but low, if you know what I mean, and Ryan flashed his torch to show where we was. Then I 'eard oars splash-in' and in a minute or two a couple of blackfellows rowed up in the dinghy. Ryan and me, we got in, and they pushed off. If I'd 'ad twenty quid on me I wouldn't 'ave given much for my chances of ever seein' Australia no more. Australia felix, by gum. We rowed for about ten minutes, I should say, and then we come alongside the ketch.

" 'What d'you think of 'er?' asks Ryan, when we got on board.

" 'Can't see much,' says I. 'Tell you more in the morning.'

" 'In the morning you got to be well out to sea,' says Ryan.

" 'When's this poor invalid boy comin'?' says I.

" 'Pretty soon now,' says Ryan. 'You go down into the cabin and light the lamp and 'ave a look round. We'll 'ave a bottle of beer. Here's a box of matches.'

" 'Suits me,' I says, and down I goes.

" 'I couldn't see much, but I knew the way about by instinct. And I didn't go down so quick I couldn't 'ave a look behind me. I twigged he was up to somethin'. I see 'im give three or four flashes with the torch. ' 'Ullo,' I says to meself, 'someone's watchin',' but if it was ashore or on sea, I couldn't say. Then Ryan comes down and I 'ad a look round. He fished out a bottle of beer for 'isself and a bottle of beer for me.

" 'The moon'll be gettin' up soon,' he says. 'There's a nice little breeze.'

" 'Startin' right away, are we?' I says.

" 'Sooner the better, after the boy's come on board, and just keep goin', see?'

" 'Look 'ere, Ryan,' I says, 'I ain't got so much as a safety razor with me.'

" 'Grow a beard then, Bill,' he answers. 'The orders is, no landin' anywhere till you get to New Guinea. If you want to go ashore at Merauke, you can.'

" 'Dutch, ain't it?' He nods. 'Look here, Ryan,' I says. 'You know I wasn't born yesterday. I can't 'elp thinkin', can I? What's the good, why don't you come out with it straight and tell me what it's all about?'

" 'Bill, old boy,' 'e says verry friendly like, 'you drink your beer and don't you ask no questions. I know I can't 'elp you thinkin', but you just believe what you're told or I swear to God I'll gouge your bloody eyes out meself.'

" 'Well, that's straight enough,' says I, laughing.

" 'Here's luck,' says 'e.

" 'He took a swig of beer and so did I.

" 'Plenty of it?' I asked.

" 'Enough to last you. I know you're not a soaker. I wouldn't 'ave given you the job if I 'adn't known that.'

" 'No,' I says, 'I like me little drop of beer, but I know when I've 'ad enough. What about the money?'

" 'I got it 'ere,' 'e says. 'I'll give it you before I get off.'

" 'Well, we sat talkin' of one thing and another. I ask 'im what crew there was and a lot like that, and he ask me if I'd 'ave a job gettin' out at night and I says, no, I could sail the boat with me eyes shut, and then suddenly I 'eard something. I got sharp ears, I 'ave, and there ain't much goin' on that I miss that way.

" 'There's a boat comin',' I says.

" 'And about time, too,' 'e says. 'I got to get back to my missus and the kids to-night.'

" 'Better go on deck, 'adn't we?' I says.

" 'No necessity at all,' 'e says.

" 'All right,' I says.

" 'We just sat there listenin'. Sounded like a dinghy. She come up and give a bump on the side. Then someone come on board. He come down the companion. All dressed up he was, blue serge suit, collar and tie, brown shoes. Not like what 'e is now.

" 'This is Fred,' says Ryan, givin' me a look.

" 'Fred Blake,' says the young fellow.

" 'This is Captain Nichols. First-rate seaman. He's all right.'

"The kid give me a look and I give 'im one. He didn't look exactly what you'd call delicate, I must say, picture of 'ealth, I'd 'ave said. Bit jumpy. If you'd asked me I'd 'ave said he was scared.

" 'Bad luck your crockin' up like this,' I says, very affable like. 'The sea air'll pull you together, believe me. Nothin' like a cruise to build up a young fellow's constitution.'

"I never see anyone go so red as 'e done when I said that. Ryan looked at 'im an' 'e looked at me and laughed. Then 'e says 'e'd tip over the dibs and be gettin' off. He 'ad it in his belt and 'e took it off and paid it over to me, two 'undred golden sovereigns. I 'adn't seen gold in donkey's years. Only the banks 'ad it. Seemed to me that whoever it was wanted to get this 'ere boy out of the way, 'e must be pretty high up.

" 'Throw in the belt, Ryan,' I says. 'I can't leave a lot of money like that lyin' about.'

" 'All right,' says 'e, 'take the belt. Well, good luck.' And before I could say a word he was out of the cabin and 'e'd popped over the side and the boat was movin' away. They wasn't takin' no chances of my seein' who was in it."

"And what happened then?"

"Well, I put the money back in the belt and strapped it round me."

"Devil of a weight, isn't it?"

"When we come to Merauke we bought a couple of boxes and I've hid mine away so as nobody knows where it is. But if things go on like they are, I'll be able to carry all what's left without so much as feelin' it."

"What d'you mean by that?"

"Well, we sailed all the way up the coast, inside the Bank, of course, fine weather and all that, nice breeze, and I said to the kid: 'What about a game of cribbage?' Had to pass the time somehow, you know, and I knew 'e'd got a good bit of money. I didn't see why I shouldn't 'ave some of it. I've played cribbage all me life, and I thought I got a soft thing on. I believe the devil's in them cards. D'you know, I 'aven't 'ad a winnin' day since we left Sydney. I've lost a matter of seventy pounds, I 'ave. And it's not as if 'e could play. It's the devil's own luck he's got."

"Perhaps he plays better than you think."

"Don't you believe it. What I don't know about cribbage ain't worth knowin'. D'you think I'd 'ave took him on if I 'adn't known that? No, it's luck, and luck can't go on for ever. It's bound to change and then I'll get back all I've lost and all he's got besides. It's aggravatin', of course, but I ain't worryin'."

"Has he told you anything about himself?"

"Not a thing. But I've put two and two together and I got a pretty shrewd idea what's at the bottom of it."

"Oh!"

"There's politics at the bottom of it or I'll eat my 'at. If there 'adn't been Ryan wouldn't 'ave been mixed up in it. The Government's pretty rocky in New South Wales. They're 'angin' on by their teeth. If there was a scandal they'd go out to-morrow. There'll 'ave to be an election soon, anyway. They think they'll get in again, but my belief is it's a toss-up and I guess they know they can't take a risk. I shouldn't be surprised if Fred wasn't the son of somebody pretty important."

"Premier, or somebody like that, you mean? Is there one of the Ministers called Blake?"

"Blake's no more 'is name than it is mine. It's one of the Ministers all right, and Fred's 'is son or 'is nephew; and whatever it is, if it come out, he'd lose 'is seat, and my opinion is they all thought it better Fred should be out of the way for a few months."

"And what d'you think it is he did?"

"Murder, if you ask me."

"He's only a kid."

"Old enough to 'ang."

CHAPTER XII

"HULLOA, what's that?" said the skipper. "There's a boat comin'."

His hearing was indeed acute, for Dr. Saunders heard nothing. The captain peered into the darkness. He put his hand on the doctor's arm and, getting up noiselessly, slipped down into the cabin. In a moment he came up again and the doctor saw that he carried a revolver.

"No 'arm bein' on the safe side," he said.

Now the doctor discerned the faint grating of oars turning in rusty rowlocks.

"It's the schooner's dinghy," he said.

"I know it is. But I don't know what they want. Pretty late to pay a social call."

The two men waited in silence and listened to the approaching sound. Presently, they not only heard the splash of the water, but saw the vague outline of the boat, a little black mass against the black sea.

"Hullo, there," cried Nichols suddenly. "Boat ahoy."

"That you, Captain?" a voice travelled over the water.

"Yes, it's me. What d'you want?"

He stood at the gunwale, the revolver in his hand, hanging from the end of his loose arm. The Australian rowed on.

"Wait till I come on board," he said.

"Pretty late, ain't it?" cried Nichols.

The Australian told the man who was rowing to stop.

"Wake up the doctor, will you? I don't half like the look of my Jap. Seems to me he's sinking."

"The doctor's 'ere. Come to the side."

The dinghy came on and Captain Nichols, leaning over, saw that the Australian was alone with a blackfellow.

"D'you want me to come over?" asked Dr. Saunders.

"Sorry to trouble you, Doc, but I think he's pretty bad."

"I'll come. Wait till I get my things."

He stumbled down the companion and picked up a satchel in which he had what was necessary for emergencies. He climbed over the side and let himself down into the dinghy. The blackfellow rowed off quickly.

"You know what it is," said the Australian, "you can't get a diver for the asking, not a Jap, and they're the only ones worth having. There isn't one in the Arus out of a job now, and if I lose this chap it's going to queer my pitch good and proper. I mean, I shall have to go all the way to Yokohama, and then the chances are I shall have to hang around for a month before I get what I want."

The diver was lying on one of the lower bunks in the crew's quarters. The air was fetid and the heat fearful. Two blackfellows were asleep and one of them, lying on his back, breathed stertorously. A third, sitting on his haunches on the floor by the

sick man's side, was staring at him with eyes that had no meaning. A hurricane lamp hanging from a beam gave a dim light. The diver was in a state of collapse. He was conscious, but when the doctor went up to him there was no change in the expression of the coal-black Oriental eyes. One might have thought that they gazed already at Eternity and could not be distracted by a transitory object. Dr. Saunders felt his pulse and put his hand on the clammy forehead. He gave him a hypodermic injection. He stood by the side of the bunk and looked reflectively at the recumbent form.

"Let's go up and get a little air," he said presently. "Tell this man to come and tell us if there's any change."

"Is he for it?" asked the Australian, when they got on deck.

"Looks like it."

"God, I do have bad luck."

The doctor chuckled. The Australian asked him to sit down. The night was as still as death. In the calm water the stars from their vast distances looked at themselves. The two men were silent. Some say that if you believe a thing with sufficient force it becomes true. For that Jap, lying there, dying there, painlessly, it was not the end, but the turning over of a page; he knew, as certainly as he knew that the sun in a few hours would rise, that he was but slipping from one life to another. Karma, the deeds of this as of all the other lives he had passed, would be somehow continued; and perhaps, in his exhaustion, the only emotion that remained to him was curiosity, anxious it might be or amused, to know in what condition he would be reborn. Dr. Saunders dozed off. He was awakened by a black man's hand on his shoulder.

"Come quick."

The dawn was breaking. It was not yet day, but the light of the stars had dwindled and the sky was ghostly. He went below. The diver was sinking fast. His eyes were open still, but his pulse was imperceptible and his body had the coldness of death. Suddenly there was a little rattle, not loud, but deprecating and conciliatory, like the manners of the Japanese, and he was dead. The two sleepers had wakened and one sat on the edge of his bunk, his black naked legs dangling, while the other, as though he wanted to shut away from him what was happening so close, sat crouched on the floor with his back to the dying man, and held his head in his hands.

When the doctor went back on deck, and told the captain, he shrugged his shoulders.

"No physique, these Japs," he said.

Dawn now was stealing over the water, and the first rays of the sun touched its stillness with cool and delicate colours.

"Well, I'll be getting back to the *Fenton*," said the doctor. "I know the captain wants to sail soon after it's light."

"You'd better have some breakfast before you go. You must be pretty peckish."

"Well, I could do with a cup of tea."

"I'll tell you what. I've got some eggs, I was keeping them for the Jap, but he won't want 'em now, let's have some bacon and eggs."

He shouted for the cook.

"I just fancy a plate of bacon and 'eggs," he said, rubbing his hands. "They ought to be pretty fresh still."

Presently the cook brought them, piping hot, with tea and biscuits.

"God, they smell good," said the Australian. "Funny thing, you know, I never get tired of bacon and eggs. When I'm at home I have them every day. Sometimes my wife gives me something else for a change, but there's nothing I like 'alf so much."

But when the blaekfellow was rowing Dr. Saunders back to the *Fenton*, it struck him that death was a funnier thing even than that the schooner's captain should like bacon and eggs for breakfast. The flat sea was shining like polished steel. Its colours were pale and delicate like the colours in the boudoir of an eighteenth-century marquise. It seemed very odd to the doctor that men should die. There was something absurd in the notion that this pearl diver, the heir of innumerable generations, the result of a complicated process of evolution that had lasted since the planet was formed, here and now, because of a succession of accidents that confounded the imagination, should be brought to death on this lost and uninhabited spot.

Captain Nichols was shaving when the doctor reached the side and he gave him a hand to help him on board.

"Well, what's the news?"

"Oh, he's dead."

"I thought as much. What's bein' done about buryin' 'im?"

"I don't know, I didn't ask. I suppose they'll just throw him overboard."

"Like a dog?"

"Why not?"

The skipper gave signs of an agitation that not a little surprised Dr. Saunders.

"That won't do at all. Not on a British vessel. He must be buried in the proper way. I mean, he must 'ave a proper service and all that."

"He was a Buddhist or Shintoist or something like that, you know."

"I can't 'elp that. I been at sea, man and boy, for more than thirty years, and when a chap dies on a British ship he must 'ave a British funeral. Death levels all men, Doc, you ought to know that, and at a time like this we can't 'old it up against a fellow that he's a Jap, or a nigger, or a dago, or anything. Hi, you men, lower a boat and look sharp about it. I'll go over to the schooner meself. When I see you didn't come back all this time I said to meself that this was going to 'appen. That's why I was shavin' when you come alongside."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm goin' to talk to the skipper of that there schooner. We must do what's right. Give that Jap a send-off in style. I've always made a point of that on every vessel I've commanded. Makes a rare good impression on the crew. Then they know what to expect if anything 'appens to them."

The dinghy was lowered and the skipper rowed away. Fred Blake came aft. With his tousled hair, his clear skin and blue eyes, his springtime radiance, he looked like a young Bacchus in a Venetian picture. The doctor, tired after a night of little sleep, felt a moment's envy of his insolent youth.

"How's the patient, Doctor?"

"Dead."

"Some fellows have all the luck, don't they?"

Dr. Saunders gave him a sharp look, but did not speak.

In a little while, they saw the dinghy coming back from the schooner, but without Captain Nichols. The man called Utan spoke English well. He brought them a message that they were all to go over.

"What the hell for?" asked Blake.

"Come on," said the doctor.

The two white men climbed over the side and the remaining two members of the crew.

"Captain say everybody. China boy, too."

"Jump in, Ah Kay," said the doctor to his servant, who was sitting on deck, unconcerned, sewing a button on a pair of trousers.

Ah Kay put down his work and with his friendly little smile stepped down on light feet into the dinghy. They rowed over to the schooner. When they climbed up the ladder, they found Captain Nichols and the Australian waiting for them.

"Captain Atkinson agrees with me that we ought to do the right thing by this poor Jap," said Nichols, "and as he 'asn't the experience what I 'ave, 'e's asked me to conduct the ceremony in proper style."

"That's right," said the Australian.

"It isn't my place, I know that. When you 'ave a death at sea it's the captain's place to read the service, but 'e don't 'appen to 'ave a prayer-book on board and 'e don't know what to do any more than a canary with a rumpsteak. Am I right, Captain?"

The Australian nodded gravely.

"But I thought you were a Baptist," said the doctor.

"Ordinarily, I am," said Nichols. "But when it comes to funerals and that-like I always 'ave used the prayer-book and I always shall use the prayer-book. Now, Captain, as soon as your party's ready we'll assemble the men and get on with the job."

The Australian walked forrard and in a minute or two rejoined them.

"Looks to me as if they was just putting in the last stitches," he said.

"A stitch in time saves nine," said Captain Nichols, somewhat to the doctor's perplexity.

"What d'you say to a little drink while we're waiting?"

"Not yet, Captain. We'll 'ave that afterwards. Business before pleasure."

Then a man came along.

"All finished, boss," he said.

"That's fine," said Nichols. "Come on, chaps."

He was alert. He held himself erect. His little foxy eyes were twinkling with pleasant anticipation. The doctor observed with demure amusement his air of subdued gaiety. It was plain that he enjoyed the situation. They marched aft. The crews of the two boats, blackfellows all of them, were standing about, some with pipes in their mouths, one or two with the fag-end of a cigarette sticking to their thick lips. On the deck lay a bundle in what

looked to the doctor like a copra sack. It was very small. You could hardly believe that it contained what had once been a man.

"Are you all 'ere?" asked Captain Nichols, looking round. "No smokin', please. Respect for the dead."

They put away their pipes, and spat out the ends of their cigarettes.

"Stand round now. You near me, Captain. I'm only doin' this to oblige, you understand, and I don't want you to think I don't know it's your place and not mine. Now then, are you all ready?"

Captain Nichols's recollection of the burial service was somewhat sketchy. He began with a prayer that owed much to his invention, but which he delivered with unction. Its language was florid. He ended with a resounding amen.

"Now we'll sing a 'ymn." He looked at the blackfellows. "You've all been to missionary schools and I want you to put your guts in it. Let 'em 'ear you right away to Macassar. Come on, all of you. Onward Christian Soldiers, onwards as to war."

He burst out singing in a throaty, tuneless strain, but with fervour, and he had hardly started before the crews of the two boats joined in. They sang lustily with rich deep voices and the sound travelled over the peaceful sea. It was a hymn they had all learnt in their native islands, and they knew every word of it; but in their unfamiliar speech, with its queer intonations, it gathered a strange mystery so that it seemed not like a Christian hymn but like the barbaric, rhythmical shouting of a savage multitude. It rang with fantastic sounds, the beating of drums and the clang of curious instruments, and it suggested the night and dark ceremonies by the water's edge and the dripping of blood in human sacrifice. Ah Kay, very clean in his neat white dress, stood a little apart from the black men in an attitude of negligent grace, and in his lovely liquid eyes was a look of a slightly scornful astonishment. They ended the first verse and without prompting from Captain Nichols sang the second. But when they started on the third he clapped his hands sharply.

"Now then, that's enough," he cried. "This ain't a bloody concert. We don't want to stay 'ere all night."

They stopped suddenly and he looked round with severity. The doctor's eyes fell on that small bundle in the copra sack that lay on deck in the middle of the circle. He did not know why, but he thought of the little boy the dead diver once had been, with his yellow face and sloe-black eyes, who played in the streets of a

Japanese town and was taken by his mother in her pretty Japanese dress, with pins in her elaborately done hair and clogs on her feet, to see the cherry blossom when it was in flower and, on holidays, to the temple, where he was given a cake; and perhaps once, dressed all in white, with an ashen wand in his hand, he had gone with all his family on pilgrimage and watched the sun rise from the summit of Fuji Yama, the sacred mountain.

"Now I'm going to say another prayer and when I come to the words, 'we therefore commend 'is body to the deep,' and mind you watch out for them, I don't want a hitch or anythin' like that, you just catch 'old of 'im and pop 'im o'er, see? Better detail two men to do that, Captain."

"You, Bob. And Jo."

The two men stepped forward and made to seize the body.

"Not yet, you damned fools," cried Captain Nichols. "Let me get the words out of me mouth, blast you." And then, without stopping to take breath, he burst into prayer. He went on till he could evidently think of nothing more to say, and then, raising his voice a little: "Forasmuch as it 'as pleased Almighty God of 'is great mercy to take unto 'isself the soul of our dear brother 'ere departed: We therefore commend his body to the deep . . ." He gave the two men a severe look, but they were staring at him with open mouths. "Now then, don't be all night about it. Pop the bleeder over, blast you."

With a start they leapt at the little bundle that lay on deck and flung it overboard. It plunged into the water with hardly a splash. Captain Nichols went on with a little satisfied smile on his face:

"To be turned into corruption, lookin' for the resurrection of the body when the sea shall give up its dead. Now, dearly beloved brethren, we'll all say the Lord's Prayer, and no mumblin', please. God wants to 'ear and I want to 'ear. Our Father which art in 'eaven . . ."

He repeated it to the crew in a loud voice and all but Ah Kay said it with him.

"Now, men, that's about all," he continued, but in the same unctuous voice: "I'm glad to 'ave 'ad the opportunity to conduct this sad ceremony in the proper way. In the midst of life we are in death, and accidents will 'appen in the best regulated families. I want you to know that if you're taken to the bourne from which no one ever comes back, so long as you're on a British ship and under the British flag, you can be sure of 'avin' a decent funeral and bein'

buried like a faithful son of our Lord Jesus Christ. Under ordinary circumstances I should now call upon you to give three cheers for your captain, Captain Atkinson, but this is a sad occasion upon which we are gathered together and our thoughts are too deep for tears, so I will ask you to give 'im three cheers in your 'earts. And now to God the Father, God the Son and God the 'oly Ghost. A-a-men."

Captain Nichols turned aside with the manner of a man descending from the pulpit and held out his hand to the captain of the schooner. The Australian wrung it warmly.

"By God, you done that first-rate," he said.

"Practice," said Captain Nichols modestly.

"Now, boys, what about a tiddly?"

"That's the idea," said Captain Nichols. He turned to his crew. "You fellers get back to the *Fenton* and, Tom, you come back and fetch us."

The four men shambled along the deck. Captain Atkinson brought up from the cabin a bottle of whisky and some glasses.

"A parson couldn't have done it better," he said, raising his glass to Captain Nichols.

"It's just a matter of feelin'. You 'ave to 'ave the feelin'. I mean, when I was conductin' that service I didn't think it was only a dirty little Jap, it was just the same to me as if it been you or Fred or the doctor. That's Christianity, that is."

CHAPTER XIII

THE monsoon was blowing hard and when they left the shelter of the land they found a heavy sea. The doctor was ignorant of sailing vessels and to his unaccustomed eyes it seemed formidable. Captain Nichols had the water-cask aft lashed down. The waves, crested with white, looked very large and in that small craft one was very near the water. Now and then a heavy sea struck them and a cloud of spoon-drift swept along the deck. They were passing islands and as they passed each one the doctor asked himself if he could swim so far if they were capsized. He was nervous. It exasperated him. He knew there was no need. Two of the black-fellows were sitting on the hatch tying rope together to make a fishing line, and, intent on their job, never so much as gave the sea

a glance. The water was muddy and there were reefs all around them. The skipper ordered one of the men to stand on the jib-boom and keep a look-out. The blackfellow guided the skipper with a gesture of one arm or the other. The sun shone and the sky was bright blue, but high above them white clouds raced with a swift and even motion. The doctor tried to read, but he had to duck constantly to avoid the spray when a sea broke over them. Presently there was a dull scraping and he clutched the gunwale. They had struck a reef. They bumped over and were again in deep water. Nichols shouted a curse at the look-out man for not being more careful. They struck another reef and again bumped off.

"We'd better get out of this," said the skipper.

He altered his course and made for the open sea. The ketch rolled heavily and righted herself each time with a peevish jerk. Dr. Saunders was wet through.

"Why don't you go down into the cabin?" the skipper shouted.

"I prefer being on deck."

"No danger, you know."

"Is it going to get any worse?"

"I shouldn't wonder. Looks to me as if it was blowin' up a bit."

The doctor, looking over the stern, watched a heavy sea charge down upon them, and he expected the next wave to crash before the ketch had time to recover, but with an agility that was almost human she avoided it just in time and triumphantly rode on. He was not comfortable. He was not happy. Fred Blake came up to him.

"Grand, isn't it? Exhilarating having a bit of a blow like this."

His curling hair was all blown about in the wind and his eyes were shining. He was enjoying himself. The doctor shrugged his shoulders, but did not answer. He looked at a great billow, with overhanging, breaking crest, that came rolling towards them, as though it were not the unconscious result of natural forces, but had a malignant purpose. Nearer and nearer it came and it seemed as though it must inevitably overwhelm them. The frail craft could never withstand that monstrous mountain of water.

"Look out," shouted the skipper.

He kept the lugger dead before it. Dr. Saunders instinctively clung to the mast. It struck them and it seemed that a wall of water poured over them. The deck was swimming.

"That was a whopper," shouted Fred.

"I needed a bath," said the skipper.

They both laughed. But the doctor was sick with fear. He wished with all his heart that he had stayed safely on the island of Takana till the steamer called. How stupid it was to risk his life rather than endure two or three weeks of boredom! He swore to himself that if he escaped this time nothing would induce him again to do anything so absurd. He did not attempt to read any more. He could not see through his spectacles splashed with water, and his book was drenched. He watched the waves that swept on. The islands now were dim in the distance.

"Enjoyin' it, Doc?" shouted the skipper.

The lugger was tossing about like a cork. Dr. Saunders tried to force a smile to his lips.

"Fine thing to blow the cobwebs away," the skipper added.

The doctor had never seen him in better spirits. He was alert. He seemed to enjoy his own competence. It was no figure of speech to say that he was in his element. Fear? He knew nothing of it, that vulgar, cheating, shifty man; there was nothing decent in him, he knew nothing of whatever gave dignity to man, or beauty, and you had only to know him for twenty-four hours to be certain that if there were two ways of doing a thing, a straight one and a crooked, he would choose the crooked one. In that low and squalid mind there was but one motive, the desire to get the better of his fellow men by foul means; it was not even a passion of evil, in which after all there might be a sinister grandeur, it was a puckish malice that found satisfaction in besting another. And yet here, in this tiny vessel in that vast desert of angry waves, without possibility of succour if catastrophe befell them, he was at ease, strong in his knowledge of the sea, proud, self-assured and happy. He seemed to take pleasure in his mastery of the little boat he managed with such confident skill; it was in his hands like a horse in a horseman's when he knows every trick and habit it has, every whim and every capacity; he watched the waves with a smile in his foxy little eyes, and he nodded with self-satisfaction as they thundered by. It almost seemed to the doctor that to him they too were living things that he found a cynical amusement in getting the better of.

Dr. Saunders flinched as he watched the huge waves race after them and clinging to the mast he swayed away from the sea as the lugger heeled over; and then, as though his weight could make all the difference, swayed back as she rolled. He knew he was pale,

and he felt his face stiff. He wondered if there would be any chance of getting into one of the two dinghies if the boat foundered. There wouldn't be much chance for them if they did. They were a hundred miles away from any inhabited spot and out of the line of traffic. If anything happened the only thing was to let oneself drown quickly. It was not death he minded, but dying, and he wondered if it would be very unpleasant while he swallowed the water and choked, and, notwithstanding his will, desperately struggled.

Then the cook lurched along the deck bearing their dinner. A heavy sea had swamped out the hold, and he had not been able to light a fire, so it consisted of a tin of corned beef and cold potatoes.

"Send Utan along to take the helm," the skipper shouted.

The blackfellow took the skipper's place, and the three men gathered round their wretched meal.

"Pretty peckish, I am," said Nichols jovially, as he helped himself. "How's the appetite, Fred?"

"All right."

The lad was soaked to the skin, but his cheeks were bright and his eyes glistened. Dr. Saunders wondered if his air of unconcern was assumed. Frightened, and angry with himself because he was, he gave the skipper a sour look.

"If you can digest this you can digest an ox."

"Bless you, I never 'ave dyspepsia when there's a bit of a gale. Like a tonic to me, it is."

"How long is this blasted wind going to blow?"

"Not likin' it much, Doc?" The skipper chuckled slyly. "It may drop toward sunset or it may blow up a bit."

"Can't we get in the shelter of some island?"

"Better off at sea. These boats, they can stand anythin'. I don't fancy goin' to pieces on a reef."

When they had finished eating, Captain Nichols lit his pipe.

"What about a game of cribbage, Fred?" he said.

"I'm on."

"You're not going to play that damned game now?" cried the doctor.

Captain Nichols gave the sea a sneering glance.

"A little bit of water; that's nothin'. Them niggers, they can steer a boat with anyone."

They went down into the cabin. Dr. Saunders stayed on deck and sullenly watched the sea. The afternoon stretched intermin-

ably before him. He wondered what Ah Kay was up to and presently he scrambled forward. Only one of the crew was on deck. The hatch was battened down.

"Where's my boy?" he asked.

The man pointed to the hold.

"Sleeping. Want to go down?"

He raised the hatch, and the doctor clambered down the companion. A lamp was alight. It was dark and noisome. One black-fellow was sitting on the floor, with nothing on but a loin-cloth, mending his trousers; the other and Ah Kay were in their bunks. They were sleeping quietly. But when the doctor lurched up to Ah Kay he woke and gave his master his sweet and friendly smile.

"Feeling all right?"

"Yes."

"Frightened?"

Ah Kay, smiling again, shook his head.

"Go back to sleep," said the doctor.

He climbed up the companion and with difficulty pushed up the hatch. The man on deck helped him, and as he came out on deck a sheet of water hit him in the face. His heart sank. He swore and shook his fist at the angry sea.

"Better get below," said the blackfellow. "Wet up here."

The doctor shook his head. He stood there clinging to a rope. He wanted human companionship. He knew perfectly well that he was the only man on board who was afraid. Even Ah Kay, who knew no more of the sea than he, was unconcerned. There was no danger. They were as safe on the lugger as on dry land, and yet he could not prevent the pang of terror that seized him each time that a following wave caught them up and sent a cloud of spoon-drift hurtling along the deck. The water flowed out of the scuppers in a great rush. He was terrified. It seemed to him that it was only by an effort of will that he did not curl up in a corner and whimper. He had an instinct to appeal for succour to a God he did not believe in, and he had to clench his teeth to prevent his trembling lips from uttering a prayer. The circumstance seemed to him ironical that he, an intelligent man, who looked upon himself as something of a philosopher, should be affected with this craven fear, and he smiled grimly at the absurdity. It was a bit thick, if you came to think of it, that he, with his quick brain, his wide knowledge and reasoned view of life, he who had nothing to lose by death, should tremble while these men, ignorant like the

blackfellow by his side, base like the captain or dull like Fred Blake, should remain unperturbed. It just showed what a poor thing the mind was. He felt sick with fright, and he asked himself what it was he was frightened of. Death? He had faced death before. Once indeed he had decided to make an end of himself, but painlessly, and it had needed an odd mixture of courage, cynicism and cold reason to make him go on with a life that seemed to offer nothing desirable. He was glad now that he had had the sense. But he knew that he had no great attachment to life. Sometimes when ill he had felt his hold on it so slight that he looked forward to dissolution not only with resignation but with cheerfulness. Pain? He bore pain pretty well. After all, if you could bear dengue or a bad toothache with serenity, you could bear anything. No, it was not that, it was just some instinct over which he had no control; and he looked curiously, as though it were something outside himself, at the terror that made his throat dry and his knees shake.

"Very odd," he muttered as he made his way aft.

He glanced at his wrist-watch. By God, it was only three. There was something horrible in that clean, wind-swept sky. Its brilliance was heartless. It seemed to have nothing to do with the tempestuous sea; and the sea, so hard and bright a blue, recked nothing of man. Strange, senseless powers that sported with him and destroyed him not from malice, but in wanton amusement.

"Give me the sea from the beach," the doctor muttered to himself grimly.

He went down into the cabin.

"Two for his 'eels at all events," he heard from the skipper.

They were still playing their dreary game.

"How's the weather, Doc?"

"Rotten."

"It'll 'ave to be worse before it's better, like a woman 'avin' a baby. Grand boats these are. Weather a hurricane. I'd rather go to sea in one of these Australian pearlin' luggers than in a transatlantic liner."

"It's your crib," said Fred.

They were playing on the captain's mattress, and the doctor, changing his dripping clothes, flung himself on the other. He could not read in the fitful light of the swaying lamp. He lay and listened to the monotonous terms of the game. They struck the ear with an insistent jar. The cabin creaked and groaned and over

his head the wind roared furiously. He was shaken from side to side.

"That was a roll," said Fred.

"Takin' it grand, ain't she? Fifteen two. Fifteen four.

Fred was winning again and the skipper played to a running accompaniment of complaint. Dr. Saunders stiffened his limbs to bear the misery of his fear. The hours passed with frightful slowness. Toward sunset Captain Nichols went on deck.

"Blowin' up a bit," he said, when he came down again. "I'm goin' to 'ave a nap. It don't look to me as if I'd get much sleep to-night."

"Why don't you lay her to?" asked Fred.

"Bring 'er up to the wind with a sea like this runnin'? No, sir. She's all right as long as everythin' 'olds."

He coiled himself up on his mattress and in five minutes was snoring peacefully. Fred went on deck to get a breath of air. The doctor was angry with himself for having been such a fool as to take a passage on this small craft, and he was angry with the captain and with Fred because they were free of the terror that obsessed him. But when the ketch had seemed about to founder a hundred times, and each time righted herself, there stole upon him gradually an unwilling admiration for the gallant little boat. At seven the cook brought them their supper and woke Captain Nichols to eat it. He had been able to make a fire, and they had hot stew and hot tea. Then the three of them went on deck and the skipper took the helm. It was a clear night, with the stars in their myriads twinkling brightly; the sea was rough, and in the darkness the waves looked enormous.

"By God, there's a big 'un," cried Fred.

A huge wall of green water, with a breaking crest, was rushing down on them. It looked as though it must inevitably fall on them, and if it did, the *Fenton*, powerless to rise to it, must be rolled over and over. The skipper glanced round and jammed himself against the wheel. He steered so that the wave should strike them dead aft. Suddenly the stern slewed off the course and there was a crash and a mass of water swept over the quarter. They were blinded. Then the bulwarks rose above the sea. The *Fenton* shook herself like a dog stepping on to dry land and the water poured out of the scuppers.

"Gettin' beyond a joke," bellowed the skipper.

"Any islands near?"

"Yep. If we can keep goin' for a couple of hours we can get under their lee."

"What about reefs?"

"There ain't any marked. Moon'll be out soon. You two chaps better go below."

"I'll stay on deck," said Fred. "Stuffy in the cabin."

"Please yourself. What about you, Doc?"

The doctor hesitated. He hated the look of the angry sea and he was bored with being frightened. He had died so many deaths that he had exhausted his emotion.

"Can I be any use?"

"No more than a snowball in 'ell."

"Remember you carry Cæsar and his fortunes," he shouted in the skipper's ear.

But Captain Nichols, not having had a classical education, did not see the point of the jest. If I perish, I perish, the doctor reflected, and he made up his mind to get all the enjoyment he could out of what might be his last hours on earth. He went forward to fetch Ah Kay. The boy followed him back and came down with him into the cabin.

"Let's try Kim Ching's chandu," said Dr. Saunders. "No need to stint ourselves to-night."

The boy got the lamp and the opium from the valise, and with his accustomed nonchalance started to prepare the pipe. Never had the first long inhalation seemed more delicious. They smoked alternately. Gradually peace descended upon the doctor's soul. His nerves ceased to tingle with the roll of the lugger. Fear left him. After the usual six pipes that the doctor smoked every night Ah Kay lay back as if he had finished.

"Not yet," said Dr. Saunders softly. "For once I'm going the whole hog."

The motion of the boat was not unpleasant. Little by little it seemed to him that he grasped its rhythm. It was only his carcase that was tossed from side to side, his spirit soared in regions far above the storm. He walked in the infinite, but he knew, before Einstein, that it was bounded by his own thought. He knew once more that he had but to stretch his intelligence ever so little to solve a great mystery; and again he did not do it because it gave him more pleasure to know that it was there waiting to be solved. It had agreeably tantalised him so long, it was indelicate, when any moment might be his last, to ravish its secret. He was like a

well-bred man who will not expose his mistress to the humiliation of knowing that he does not believe her lies. Ah Kay fell asleep, curled up at the foot of the mattress. Dr. Saunders moved a little so as not to disturb him. He thought of God and of eternity, and he laughed softly, in his heart, at the absurdity of life. Scraps of poetry floated in his memory. It seemed to him that he was dead already and Captain Nichols, Charon in a tarpaulin, was bearing him to a strange, sweet place. At last he fell asleep also.

CHAPTER XIV

HE was awakened by the chill of the dawn. He opened his eyes and saw that the companion hatch was open, and then he was aware of the skipper and Fred Blake sleeping on their mattresses. They had come down and left the hatch open on account of the pungent smell of the opium. Suddenly it occurred to him that the lugger rolled no longer. He raised himself. He felt a trifle heavy, for he was unaccustomed to smoke so much, and he thought he would get into the air. Ah Kay was resting peacefully where he had fallen asleep. He touched him on the shoulder. The boy opened his eyes and his lips broke immediately into the slow smile that gave such beauty to his young face. He stretched himself and yawned.

"Get me some tea," said the doctor.

Ah Kay was on his feet in a minute. The doctor followed him up the companion. The sun had not yet risen and one pale star still loitered in the sky, but the night had thinned to a ghostly grey, and the ketch seemed to float on the surface of a cloud. The man at the helm in an old coat, with a muffler round his neck and a battered hat crammed down on his head, gave the doctor a surly nod. The sea was quite calm. They were passing between two islands so close together that they might have been sailing down a canal. There was a very light breeze. The blackfellow at the helm seemed half asleep. The dawn slid between the low, wooded islands, gravely, with a deliberate calmness that seemed to conceal an inward apprehension, and you felt it natural and even inevitable that men should have personified it in a maiden. It had indeed the shyness and the grace of a young girl, the charming seriousness, the indifference and the ruthlessness. The sky had the washed-out colour of an archaic statue. The virgin forests on each

side of them still held the night, but then insensibly the grey of the sea was shot with the soft hues of a pigeon's breast. There was a pause, and with a smile the day broke. Sailing between those uninhabited islands, on that still sea, in a silence that caused you almost to hold your breath, you had a strange and exciting impression of the beginning of the world. There man might never have passed and you had a feeling that what your eyes saw had never been seen before. You had a sensation of primeval freshness, and all the complication of the generations disappeared. A stark simplicity, as bare and severe as a straight line, filled the soul with rapture. Dr. Saunders knew at that moment the ecstasy of the mystic.

Ah Kay brought him a cup of tea, jasmine-scented, and scrambling down from the spiritual altitudes on which for an instant he had floated he made himself comfortable, as in an arm-chair, in the bliss of a material enjoyment. The air was cool but balmy. He asked for nothing but to go on for ever in that boat sailing on an even keel between green islands.

When he had been sitting there an hour, delighting in his ease, he heard steps on the companion, and Fred Blake came on deck. In his pyjamas, with his tousled hair, he looked very young, and as was natural to his age he had awakened fresh, with all the lines smoothed out of his face, and not puckered and wrinkled and time-worn as sleep had left the doctor.

"Up early, Doctor?" He noticed the empty cup. "I wonder if I can get a cup of tea."

"Ask Ah Kay."

"All right. I'll just get Utan to throw a couple of buckets of water over me."

He went forward and spoke to one of the men. The doctor saw the blackfellow lower a bucket by a rope into the sea, and then Fred Blake stripped his pyjamas and stood on deck naked while the other threw the contents over him. The bucket was lowered again and Fred turned round. He was tall, with square shoulders, a small waist and slender hips; his arms and neck were tanned, but the rest of his body was very white. He dried himself, and putting on his pyjamas again came aft. His eyes were shining and on his lips was the outline of a smile.

"You're a very good-looking young fellow," said the doctor.

Fred gave an indifferent shrug of the shoulders and sank into the next chair.

"We lost a boat in the night. D'you know that?"

"No, I didn't."

"Blew like the devil. We've lost the jib. Just torn to tatters. Nichols wasn't half glad to get into the shelter of the islands, I can tell you. I thought we'd never make it."

"Did you stay up on deck all the time?"

"Yes, I thought if we foundered I'd rather be in the open."

"There wouldn't have been much chance for you."

"No, I know that."

"Weren't you afraid?"

"No. You know, I think if it's coming to you, it'll come. And there's nothing to do about it."

"I was frightened."

"Nichols said you were in the afternoon. He thought it a hell of a joke."

"It's a question of age, you know. The old are much more easily frightened than the young. I couldn't help thinking it rather funny at the time that I, who had so much less to lose than you who've got all your life before you, should dread losing it so much more than you did."

"How could you think if you were as scared as all that?"

"I was scared with my body. That didn't prevent me from thinking with my mind."

"Bit of a character, aren't you, Doctor."

"I don't know about that."

"I'm sorry I was so short with you when you asked if you could have a passage on this boat." He hesitated an instant. "I've been ill, you know, and my nerves are a bit funny. I'm not crazy about people I don't know."

"Oh, that's all right."

"I don't want you to think I'm just a rough-neck." He looked round at the peaceful scene. They had sailed out of the narrow arm between the two islands, and now found themselves in what looked like an inland sea. They were surrounded by low-lying islets, thickly covered with vegetation, and the water was as calm and blue as a Swiss lake. "Bit of a change from last night. Got worse when the moon rose. How you could have slept through it beats me. There was a hell of a racket."

"I smoked."

"Nichols said you were going to where you and the Chink went into the cabin. I wouldn't believe it. But when we came

down—hub, it was enough to take the roof of your head off."

"Why wouldn't you believe it?"

"I couldn't imagine that a man like you could degrade himself by doing such a thing."

The doctor chuckled.

"One should be tolerant of other people's vices," he said calmly.

"I've got no cause to blame anybody."

"What else has Nichols said about me?"

"Oh, well." He paused as he saw Ah Kay, as neat as a new pin in his white dress, slim and graceful, come along to fetch the empty cups. "It's no business of mine, anyway. He says you were struck off the rolls for something."

"Removed from the Register is the correct expression," placidly interrupted the doctor.

"And he says he believes you went to gaol. Naturally one can't help wondering when one sees a man with your intelligence, and the reputation you have in the East, settled in a beastly Chinese city."

"What makes you think I'm intelligent?"

"I can see that you're educated. I don't want you to think that I'm just a larrikin. I was studying to be an accountant when my health broke down. This isn't the sort of life I'm used to."

The doctor smiled. No one could have looked more radiantly well than Fred Blake. His broad chest, his athletic build, gave the lie to his tale of tuberculosis.

"Shall I tell you something?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"Oh, not about myself. I don't talk much about myself. I think there's no harm in a doctor being a trifle mysterious. It adds to his patients' belief in him. I was going to give you a reflection based on experience. When some incident has shattered the career you've mapped out for yourself, a folly, a crime or a misfortune, you mustn't think you're down and out. It may be a stroke of luck, and when you look back years after you may say to yourself that you wouldn't for anything in the world exchange the new life disaster has forced upon you for the dull, humdrum existence you would have led if circumstances hadn't intervened."

Fred looked down.

"Why do you say that to me?"

"I thought it might be a useful piece of information."

The young man sighed a little.

"You never know about people, do you? I used to think you were either white or yellow. It seems to me you can't tell what anyone'll do when it comes to the pinch. Of all the rotten skunks I've met I've never met one to beat Nichols. He'd rather go crooked than straight. You can't trust him an inch. We've been together a good while now, and I thought there wasn't much I didn't know about him. He'd do his own brother down if he got the chance. Not a decent thing about him. You should have seen him last night. I don't mind telling you it was a pretty near thing. You'd have been surprised. Calm as a cucumber. My opinion is that he just revelled in it. Once he said to me: 'Said your prayers, Fred? If we don't make the islands before it gets much worse, we shall be feeding the fishes in the morning.' And he grinned all over his ugly face. He kept his head all right. I've done a bit of sailing in Sydney harbour and I give you my word I've never seen a boat handled like he handled this one. I take my hat off to him. If we're here now it's him we owe it to. He's got nerve all right. And if he thought there was twenty pounds to be made without risk by doing us in, you and me, d'you think he'd hesitate? How d'you explain that?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"But don't you think it's funny that a chap who's nothing but a born crook should have all that pluck? I mean, I've always heard that when a man was a wrong 'un he might bluster and bully, but when it comes to a crisis he'd just crumple up. I hate that chap, and, all the same, last night I couldn't help admiring him."

The doctor smiled quietly, but did not answer. He was amused by the lad's ingenuous surprise at the complexity of human nature.

"And he's conceited. We play cribbage all the time, fancies himself at the game. I always beat him, and he will go on."

"He tells me you've been very lucky."

"Lucky in love, unlucky at cards, they say. I've played cards all my life. I've got a knack for it. That's one of the reasons why I went in for being an accountant. I've got that sort of head. It's not luck. You have luck in streaks. I know about cards, and in the long run it's always the fellow who plays best who wins. Nichols thinks he's smart. He hasn't got a dog's chance playing with me."

The conversation dropped and they sat side by side in easy

comfort. After a while Captain Nichols woke and came on deck. In his dirty pyjamas, unwashed, unshaved, with his decayed teeth and general air of having run to seed, he presented an appearance that was almost repulsive. His face, grey in the light of early morning, bore a peevish expression.

"It's come on again, Doc."

"What?"

"My dyspepsia. I 'ad a snack last night before I went to bed. I knew I oughtn't to eat anything just before turnin' in, but I was that 'ungry I just 'ad to, and it's on me chest now somethin' cruel."

"We'll see what we can do about it," smiled the doctor, getting up from his chair.

"You won't be able to do a thing," answered the skipper gloomily. "I know my digestion. After I been through a patch of dirty weather I always 'ave dyspepsia as sure as my name's Nichols. Cruel 'ard, I call it. I mean, you would think after I'd been at the wheel for eight hours I could eat a bit of cold sausage and a slice of cheese without sufferin' for it. Damn it all, a man must eat."

CHAPTER XV

DR. SAUNDERS was to leave them at Kanda-Meira, twin islands in the Kanda Sea, at which vessels of the Royal Netherlands Steam Packet Company called regularly. He thought it unlikely that he would have to wait long before a ship came in bound for some place to which he was not unwilling to go. The gale had forced them out of their course, and for twenty-four hours they were becalmed, so that it was not till the sixth day that, early in the morning, with but just enough wind to fill their sails, they sighted the volcano of Meira. The town was on Kanda. It was nine o'clock before they reached the entrance to the harbour, and the Sailing Directions had warned them that it was difficult. Meira was a tall conical hill covered with jungle almost to its summit, and a plume of dense smoke, like a huge umbrella pine, rose from its crater. The channel between the two islands was narrow and tidal streams were said to run through it with great force. In one place it was barely half a cable wide, and there were shoals in the centre with very little water over them. But Captain Nichols was a

finé seaman and knew it. He liked an opportunity to show off. Looking astonishingly disreputable in loud, striped pyjamas, a battered topi on his head, and a week's growth of white beard, he took the *Fenton* in with style.

"Don't look so bad," he said, as the little town was discovered.

There were warehouses to the water's edge and native houses on poles with thatched roofs. Naked children were playing about in the clear water. A Chinese in a broad-brimmed hat was fishing from a dug-out. The harbour was far from crowded: there were only two junks, three or four large prahus, a motor-boat and a derelict schooner. Beyond the town was a hill surmounted by a flagstaff, and from it dangled limply a Dutch flag.

"I wonder if there's a hotel," murmured the doctor.

He and Fred Blake stood on each side of Captain Nichols at the helm.

"Sure to be. Used to be a grand place in the old days. Centre of the spice trade and all that. Nutmegs. Never been 'ere meself, but I been told there's marble palaces and I don't know what all."

There were two piers. One was neat and tidy; the other, of wood, was ramshackle and badly needed a coat of paint. It was shorter than the first.

"The long 'un belongs to the Netherlands Company, I guess," said the skipper. "Let's go to the other."

They reached the side. The mainsail was lowered with a clatter and they tied up.

"Well, Doc, you've arrived. Luggage ready and all that?"

"You're coming ashore, aren't you?"

"What about it, Fred?"

"Yes, come on. I'm sick of being aboard this boat. And we've got to get another dinghy, anyway."

"We'll be wantin' a new jib, too. I'll just go and doll meself up and then I'll join you."

The skipper went down into the cabin. His toilet did not take him long, for it consisted only in changing his pyjamas for a pair of khaki trousers, putting a khaki coat on his bare back and slipping his naked feet into old tennis shoes. They clambered by rickety steps on to the pier and walked along it. There was no one there. They reached the quay and after hesitating for a moment took what looked like the main street. It was empty and silent. They wandered down the middle of the roadway, abreast, and looked about them. It was pleasant to be able to stretch one's legs after

those days on the lugger, and a relief to feel under one's feet the solid earth. The bungalows on either side of the road had very high roofs, thatched and pointed, and the roofs, jutting out, were supported by pillars, Doric and Corinthian, so as to form broad verandas. They had an air of ancient opulence, but their white-wash was stained and worn, and the little gardens in front of them were rank with tangled weeds. They came to shops and they all seemed to sell the same sort of things, cottons, sarongs and canned foods. There was no animation. Some of the shops had not even an attendant, as though no purchaser could possibly be expected. The few persons they passed, Malays or Chinese, walked quickly as though they were afraid to awaken the echo. Now and then a whiff of nutmeg assaulted the nostrils. Dr. Saunders stopped a Chinese and asked him where the hotel was. He told them to go straight on, and presently they came to it. They went in. There was no one about, but they sat down at a table on the veranda and thumped on it with their fists. A native woman in a sarong came and looked at them, but vanished when the doctor addressed her. Then appeared a half-caste, buttoning up his stengah-shifter, and Dr. Saunders asked if he could have a room. The man did not understand, and the doctor spoke to him in Chinese. The man answered in Dutch, but when the doctor shook his head, with a smile made signs that they were to wait and ran down the steps. They saw him cross the road.

"Gone to fetch someone, I expect," said the skipper. "Extraordinary thing they shouldn't speak English. They give me to understand the place was civilised."

The half-caste returned in a few minutes with a white man, who gave them a curious glance as his companion pointed them out to him, and then as he came up the steps politely raised his topi.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," he said. "Can I be of any service to you? Van Ryk cannot understand what you want."

He spoke English very correctly, but with a foreign accent. He was a young man, in the twenties, very tall, six foot three at least, and broad-shouldered, a powerful fellow, but clumsily built, so that though he gave you an impression of great strength, it was of an ungainly nature. His ducks were neat and clean. A fountain-pen protruded from the pocket of his closely-buttoned tunic.

"We've just come in on a sailing-boat," said the doctor, "and I want to know if I can have a room here till the next steamer comes in."

"Surely. The hotel isn't as full as all that."

He turned to the half-caste and fluently explained what the doctor wanted. After a brief conversation he returned to English.

"Yes, he can give you a nice room. Your board included, it'll come to eight gulden a day. The manager's away at Batavia, but van Ryk's looking after things, and he'll make you comfortable."

"What about a drink?" said the skipper. "Let's 'ave some beer."

"Won't you join us?" asked the doctor politely.

"Thank you very much."

The young man sat down and took off his topi. He had a broad, flat face and a flat nose, with high cheek-bones and rather small black eyes; his smooth skin was sallow, and there was no colour in his cheeks; his hair, cut very short, was coal-black. He was not at all good-looking, but his great ugly face bore an expression of such good-nature that you could not but be somewhat taken by him. His eyes were mild and kindly.

"Dutch?" asked the skipper.

"No, I'm a Dane. Erik Christessen. I represent a Danish company here."

"Been here long?"

"Four years."

"Good God!" cried Fred Blake.

Erik Christessen gave a little laugh, childlike in its simplicity, and his friendly eyes beamed with goodwill.

"It's a fine place. It's the most romantic spot in the East. They wanted to move me, but I begged them to let me stay on."

A boy brought them bottled beer, and the huge Dane before drinking raised his glass.

"Your very good health, gentlemen."

Dr. Saunders did not know why the stranger so very much attracted him. It was not only his cordiality, that was common enough in the East: there was something in his personality that pleased.

"Don't look as if there was much business 'ere," said Captain Nichols.

"The place is dead. We live on our memories. That is what gives the island its character. In the old days, you know, there was so much traffic that sometimes the harbour was full and vessels had to wait outside till the departure of a fleet gave them a chance to enter. I hope you'll stay here long enough to let me

show you round. It's lovely. An unsuspected isle in far-off seas."

The doctor pricked up his ears. He recognised it as a quotation, but could not place it.

"What does that come from?"

"That? Oh, 'Pippa Passes'. Browning, you know."

"How does it happen that you've read that?"

"I read a lot. I have plenty of time, you see. I like English poetry best of all. Ah, Shakespeare." He looked at Fred with a soft, gracious glance, a smile on his great mouth, and began to recite:

" ' . . . of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe: of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum.' "

It sounded odd in that foreign accent, somewhat gruff and guttural, but what was odder still was that there a young Danish trader should quote Shakespeare to the shifty scoundrel Captain Nichols and to the oafish lad Fred Blake. Dr. Saunders found the situation faintly humorous. The skipper gave him a wink that signified quite clearly that this was a queer fish, but Fred Blake flushed and looked shy. The Dane had no notion that he had done anything to excite surprise. He went on eagerly:

"The old Dutch merchants were so rich here in the great days of the spice trade, they didn't know what to do with their money. There was no cargo for the ships to bring out and so they used to bring marble and use it for their houses. If you're not in a hurry I'll show you mine. It used to belong to one of the perkeniers. And sometimes, in winter, they'd bring a cargo of nothing but ice. Funny, isn't it? That was the greatest luxury they could have. Just think of bringing ice all the way from Holland. It took six months, the journey. And they all had their carriages, and in the cool of the evening the smart thing was to drive along the shore and round and round the square. Someone ought to write about it. It was like a Dutch Arabian Nights Tale. Did you see the Portuguese fort as you came in? I'll take you there this afternoon. If there is anything I can do for you, you must let me know. I shall be very glad."

"I shall get my traps," said the doctor. "These gentlemen have

very kindly given me a passage here. I don't want to put them out more than I can help."

Erik Christessen beamed amiably on the other two. "Ah, that is what I like in the East. Everyone is so nice. Nothing is too much trouble. You cannot imagine the kindness I've received at the hands of perfect strangers."

The four of them got up and the Dane told the half-caste manager that Dr. Saunders would be coming along in a little while with his luggage and his boy.

"You should have tiffin here. It is *reistafel* to-day, and they make it very well. I shall be here."

"You two fellows had better have tiffin with me," said the doctor.

"*Reistafel*'s death to me," said Captain Nichols. "But I don't mind sittin' and watch you eat it."

Erik Christessen solemnly shook hands with the three of them.

"I'm so very glad to have met you. It's not often we get strangers on the island. And it's always a pleasure to me to meet English gentlemen."

He gave them a bow as they separated at the bottom of the steps.

"Intelligent chap, that," said Captain Nichols when they had walked a little. "Knew we was gentlemen at once."

Dr. Saunders gave him a glance. There was no trace of irony in his expression.

CHAPTER XVI

A COUPLE of hours later, the doctor having settled in, he and his guests off the *Fenton* were sitting on the veranda of the hotel drinking a glass of Schnapps before tiffin.

"The East ain't what it was," said the skipper, shaking his head. "Why, when I was a young chap, at Dutch 'otels there'd be bottles of Schnapps on the table, at tiffin and dinner, and you just 'elped yourself. Free of charge it was. And when you'd finished the bottle you told the boy to bring another."

"Must have come expensive."

"Well, you know, that's the funny thing, it didn't. You very

seldom found a chap as took advantage of it. Human nature's like that. Treat a man proper and 'e'll respond wonderfully. I believe in 'uman nature, I always 'ave."

Erik Christessen came up the steps, took off his hat to them and was passing into the hotel.

"Come and have a drink with us," called Fred.

"With pleasure. I'll just go in and wash first."

He went in.

"Hulloa, what's this?" said the skipper, eyeing Fred slyly. "I thought you didn't like strangers?"

"It depends. Seems rather a good sort to me. He never asked us who we were or what we were doing here. Generally everyone's so curious."

"He has naturally good manners," said the doctor.

"What'll you have?" asked Fred when the Dane rejoined them.

"The same as you."

He dropped his ungainly bulk into a chair. They began to chat. He said nothing that was very clever or amusing, but there was a guilelessness in his conversation that made it pleasing. He filled you with confidence. He irradiated well-being. Dr. Saunders did not judge hastily, and he mistrusted his instincts, but this he could not miss and, reflecting upon it, he could ascribe it to nothing but an amazing and delightful sincerity. It was quite obvious that Fred Blake was much taken with the huge Dane. Dr. Saunders had never heard him talk so easily.

"Look here, you'd better know our names," he said after a few minutes. "Mine's Blake, Fred Blake, and the doctor's called Saunders, and this fellow is Captain Nichols."

Somewhat absurdly Erik Christessen got up and shook hands all round.

"I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance," he said. "I hope you're going to stay here a few days."

"Are you still sailing to-morrow?" asked the doctor.

"Nothing to stay for. We saw a dinghy this morning."

They went into the dining-room. It was cool and dim. Punkahs drawn by a small boy fitfully stirred the air. There was one long table, and at one end of it were sitting a Dutchman with a half-caste wife, a stout woman in loose pale draperies, and another Dutchman with a dark enough skin to suggest that he, too, had native blood in him. Erik Christessen exchanged polite greeting

with them. They gave the strangers an incurious stare. *Reistafel* was served. They piled their plates with rice and curry, fried eggs, bananas and a dozen strange concoctions that boys kept bringing them. When everything was handed they were faced with a mountain of food. Captain Nichols looked at his with profound distaste.

"This'll be my death," he said solemnly.

"Don't eat it, then," said Fred.

"I must keep up me strength. Where would you be now if I 'adn't 'ad me strength when we struck that bad weather? It's not for my sake I'm eatin' it. It's for yours. I don't take a job unless I know I can do it, and not me worst enemy can say I spare meself."

Gradually the piles of food diminished, and Captain Nichols with stubborn determination cleaned up his plate.

"God, we haven't had a meal like this for weeks," said Fred.

He ate voraciously, with a boy's appetite, and enjoyed his food. They drank beer.

"If I don't suffer for this it'll be a miracle," said the skipper.

They had their coffee on the veranda.

"You'd better have a sleep now," said Erik, "and then when it's cooler I'll come round and show you the sights. Pity you're not staying a bit longer. It's a beautiful walk up the volcano. You can see for miles. The sea and all the islands."

"I don't see why we shouldn't stay till the doctor sails," said Fred.

"Suits me," said the skipper. "After all the 'ardships of life on the ocean wave this is a bit of all right. I'm not sure if a drop of brandy wouldn't settle that *reistafel* now I come to think of it."

"Trading, I suppose?" asked the Dane.

"We're prospectin' for shell," said the skipper. "Got to find some new beds. There's a fortune for anyone who's lucky."

"D'you have any papers here?" asked Blake. "In English, I mean."

"Not London papers. But Frith gets a paper from Australia."

"Frith. Who's Frith?"

"He's an Englishman. He gets a bundle of *Sydney Bulletins* every mail."

Fred went strangely pale, but what the emotion was that blanched his cheek, who could tell?

"D'you think there's a chance of my having a squint at them?"

"Of course. I'll borrow them or I'll take you up there."

"How old's the latest?"

"It oughtn't to be very old. A mail came in four days ago."

CHAPTER XVII

LATER, when the heat of the day was passed and his own work finished, Erik fetched them. Dr. Saunders was sitting alone with Fred, for the skipper, suffering from a violent attack of indigestion, had announced that he didn't want to see no bloody sights and had returned to the lugger. They sauntered through the town. There were more people about than in the morning. Now and then Erik took off his hat to a sunburned Dutchman who walked with a stout and listless wife. There were few Chinese, for they do not settle where no trade is, but a number of Arabs, some in smart tarbouches and neat suits of duck, others in white caps and sarongs; they were dark-skinned, with large shining eyes, and they had the Semitic look of the merchants of Tyre and Sidon. There were Malays, Papuans and half-castes. It was strangely silent. The air was heavy with fatigue. The grand houses of the old perkeniers, in which dwelt now the riff-raff of the East from Baghdad to New Hebrides, had the shamefaced look of respectable citizens who could not pay their rates. They came to a long white wall, all crumbling away, and this once had been a Portuguese monastery; and then to a ruined fort of great grey stones overrun with a wild jungle of trees and flowering shrubs. There was a wide space in front of it, facing the sea, where grew huge old trees, planted it was said by the Portuguese, casuarinas, kanaris and wild figs; and here, after the heat of the day, they had been used to ramble.

Panting a little, for he was somewhat inclined to corpulence, the doctor with his companions ascended the hill on which stood the stronghold, grey and bare, which had commanded the harbour. It was surrounded by a deep moat and the only doorway was high from the ground, so that they had to climb a ladder to enter. Inside the great square walls was the keep, and in this were large and well-proportioned chambers, with windows and doorways of a style that suggested the later Renaissance. Here officers and garrison dwelt. From the upper towers was a spacious and magnificent view.

"It's like Tristan's castle," said the doctor.

The day was softly dying, and the sea was as wine-dark as the sea on which Odysseus sailed. The islands, encircled by the smooth and shining water, had the rich green of a vestment in the treasury of a Spanish cathedral. It was a colour so bizarre and sophisticated that it seemed to belong to art rather than to nature.

"Like a green thought in a green shade," murmured the young Dane.

"They're all right from a distance," said Fred, "those islands, but when you go there—my God! At first I used to want to land. They looked fine from the sea. I thought I'd like to live on one of them for the rest of my life, away from everyone, if you know what I mean, just fishing and keeping my own chickens and pigs. Nichols laughed his head off, said they were lousy, but I insisted on seeing for myself, oh, half a dozen we must have gone to before I gave it up as a bad job. When you got to one of them and went on shore, it all went—I mean, it was just trees and crabs and mosquitoes. It slipped through your fingers, so to speak."

Erik looked at him with his soft beaming eyes, and his smile was sweet with goodwill.

"I know what you mean," he said. "It's always a risk to put things to the test of experience. It's like the locked room in Bluebeard's castle. One's all right so long as one keeps clear of that. You have to be prepared for a shock if you turn the key and walk in."

Dr. Saunders listened to the conversation of the two young men. He was perhaps a cynic and his withers were unwrung at maffy of the misfortunes that affect men, but he had a peculiar feeling for youth, perhaps because it promised so much and lasted too short a time, and it seemed to him that there was in the bitterness it experiences when reality breaks upon its illusions something more pathetic than in many graver ills. Notwithstanding the clumsy expression he understood what Fred meant and gave the boy's emotion the tribute of a sympathetic smile. As he sat there, in the mellow light, in his singlet and khaki trousers, with his hat off so that you saw his dark curling hair, he was astonishingly handsome. There was something appealing in his beauty so that Dr. Saunders, who had thought him a rather dull young man, felt on a sudden kindly disposed to him. Perhaps it was his good looks that deceived him, perhaps it was due to the companionship of Erik Christessen, but at that moment he felt that there was in the

lad a strain of something he had never suspected. Perhaps there was there the dim groping beginning of a soul. The thought faintly amused Dr. Saunders. It gave him just that little shock of surprise that one feels when what looked like a twig on a branch suddenly opens wings and flies away.

"I come up here almost every evening to watch the sunset," said Erik. "To me all the East is here. Not the East of story, the East of palaces and sculptured temples and conquerors with hordes of warriors, but the East of the beginning of the world, the East of the garden of Eden, when men were very few, simple and humble and ignorant, and the world was just waiting, like an empty garden for its absent owner."

He had a way, that hulking, pliant young man, of talking in a lyrical manner that would have been disconcerting if you had not had the feeling that it was as natural to him as to talk of pearl shell and copra and *bêche de mer*. His grandiloquence was a trifle absurd, but if it made you smile it was with kindness. He was strangely ingenuous. The prospect was so lovely, the place they sat in, that gaunt, ruined Portuguese fort, so romantic, that there high strains seemed not unfitting. Erik passed his great heavy hand gently over one of the huge blocks of stone.

"These stones and what they've seen! They have one great advantage over those islands of yours, you can never discover their secret. You can only guess. And you can guess so little. No one knows anything here. Next time I go back to Europe I shall go to Lisbon and see what I can find out of the fellows who lived here."

Of course romance was there, but it was vague, and in your ignorance you could only form pictures as blurred as ill-developed snapshots. It was on those towers that the Portuguese captains had stood, scanning the sea for the ship from Lisbon that brought them blessed news of home, or watched with apprehension the Dutch vessels that came to attack them. In your mind's eye you saw those gallant, swarthy men, in breastplate and hauberk, who carried their adventurous lives in their hands, but they were lifeless shadows, and they owed their substance only to your fancy. There were still the ruins of the little chapel where every day the miracle of transubstantiation took place and whence the priest in his vestments came, during a siege, to administer supreme unction to the soldiers who lay dying on the ramparts. The imagination was tremulous with an indistinct impression of hazard and cruelty and dauntless courage and self-sacrifice.

"Aren't you ever home-sick?" asked Fred presently.

"No. I often think of the little village from which I come, with black-and-white cows in the green pastures, and of Copenhagen. The houses in Copenhagen with their flat windows are just like smooth-faced women with large, short-sighted eyes, and the palaces and the churches look as if they had come out of a fairy tale. But I see it all like a scene in a play, it is very clear, and amusing, but I don't know that I want to step on to the stage. I am quite willing to sit in my dark seat in the gallery and watch the spectacle from far away."

"After all, one's only got one life."

"That is what I think, too. But life is what you make it. I might have been a clerk in an office, and then it would have been more difficult, but here, with the sea and the jungle, and all the memories of the past crowding in upon you, and these people, the Malays, the Papuans, the Chinese, the stolid Dutch, with my books and as much leisure as if I were a millionaire—good heavens, what can the imagination want more?"

Fred Blake looked at him for a moment, and the effort of unaccustomed reflection made him frown. When he understood what the Dane meant, his surprise was evident in his voice.

"But that's all make-believe."

"It's the only reality there is," smiled Erik.

"I don't know what you mean by that. Reality's doing things, not dreaming about them. One's only young once, one must have one's fling, and everyone wants to get on. One wants to make money and have a good position and all that sort of thing."

"Oh no. What does one do things for? Of course one has to work a certain amount to earn one's living, but after that, only to satisfy the imagination. Tell me, when you saw those islands from the sea and your heart was filled with delight, and when you landed on them and found them a dreary jungle, which was the real island? Which gave you most, and which are you going to treasure in your memory?"

Fred smiled into Erik's eager, gentle eyes.

"That's bloody rot, old boy. It's no good thinking the earth of something and when you come down to brass tacks finding out to your cost that it's a wash-out. One doesn't get much forrader by not facing facts. Where d'you expect to get to if you just take things at their face value?"

"The Kingdom of Heaven," smiled Erik.

"And where is that?" asked Fred.

"In my own mind."

"I do not wish to intrude upon this philosophic conversation," said the doctor, "but I'm bound to tell you that I'm suffering from the pangs of thirst."

Erik, with a laugh, raised his huge body from the wall on which he had been sitting.

"The sun will be setting soon, anyhow. Let's go down and I'll give you a drink in my house." He pointed to the volcano that stood over against the west, a bold cone that was silhouetted with exquisite precision against the darkening sky. He addressed himself to Fred. "Would you like to come for a climb to-morrow? You get a grand view from the top."

"I don't mind if I do."

"We must start early, on account of the heat. I could fetch you on the lugger just before dawn, and we'd row over."

"That'll do me."

They strolled down the hill and soon found themselves back in the town.

Erik's house was one of those they had passed in the morning when on landing they had wandered down the street. Dutch merchants had lived in it for a hundred years, and the firm for which he worked had bought it lock, stock and barrel. It stood within a high, whitewashed wall, but the whitewash was peeling and in places green with damp. The wall enclosed a little garden, wild and overgrown, in which grew roses and fruit trees, wantoning creepers and flowering shrubs, bananas, and two or three tall palms. It was choked with weeds. In the waning light it looked desolate and mysterious. Fire-flies flitted heavily to and fro.

"I'm afraid it's very neglected," said Erik. "Sometimes I think I'll put a couple of coolies to clear up all the mess, but I think I like it like that. I like to think of the Dutch mynheer who used to take his ease here in the cool of the evening, smoking his china pipe, while his fat mevrou sat and fanned herself."

They went into the parlour. It was a long room with a window at each end, but heavily curtained; a boy came and, standing on a chair, lit a hanging oil-lamp. There was a marble floor, and on the walls paintings in oil so dark that you could not see the subjects. There was a large round table in the middle, and round it a set of stiff chairs covered with green stamped velvet. A stuffy and uncomfortable room, but it had the charm of incongruity, and it

brought vividly to the mind's eye a demure picture of nineteenth-century Holland. The sober merchant must have unpacked with pride the furniture that had come all the way from Amsterdam, and when it was neatly arranged he must have thought it very well became his station. The boy brought beer. Erik went over to a little table to put a record on the gramophone. He caught sight of a bundle of papers.

"Oh, here are the papers for you. I sent up for them."

Fred rose from his chair, taking them, and sat down at the big round table under the lamp. Because of the doctor's remark while they were up in the old Portuguese fort, Erik put on the beginning of the last act of "Tristan". The recollection gave an added poignancy to the music. The strange and subtle little tune that the shepherd played on his reed, when he scanned the wide sea and saw no sail, was melancholy with blighted hope. But it was another pang that wrung the doctor's heart. He remembered Covent Garden in the old days and himself, in evening clothes, sitting in a stall on the aisle; in the boxes were women in tiaras, with pearls round their necks; the King, obese, with great pouches under his eyes, sat in the corner of the omnibus box; on the other side, in the corner, looking over the orchestra, the Baron and the Baroness de Meyer sat together, and she catching his eye bowed. There was an air of opulence and of security. Everything in its grand manner seemed so well-ordered, the thought of change never crossed the mind. Richter conducted. How passionate that music was, how full and with what a melodious splendour it unrolled itself sonorously upon the senses! But he had not heard in it then that something shoddy, blatant and a trifle vulgar, a sort of baronial buffet effect, that now somewhat disconcerted him. It was magnificent, of course, but a little frowsty; his ear had grown accustomed in China to complications more exquisite and harmonies less suave. He was used to a music pregnant with suggestion, illusive and nervous, and the brutal statement of facts a trifle shocked the fastidiousness of his taste. When Erik got up to turn the record over Dr. Saunders glanced at Fred to see what effect those strains were having on him. Music is queer. Its power seems unrelated to the other affections of man, so that a person who is elsewhere perfectly commonplace may have for it an extreme and delicate sensitiveness. And he was beginning to think that Fred Blake was not so ordinary as he had at first imagined. He had in him something, scarcely awakened and to himself unknown, like a little flower

self-sown in a stone wall that pathetically sought the sun, which excited sympathy and interest. But Fred had not heard a note. He sat, unconscious of his surroundings, staring out of the window. The short twilight of the tropics had darkened into night, and in the blue sky one or two stars twinkled already, but he did not look at them, he seemed to look into some black abyss of thought. The light of the lamp under which he sat threw strange, sharp shadows on his face so that it was like a mask that you hardly recognised. But his body was relaxed, as though a tension had been suddenly withdrawn, and the muscles under his brown skin were loose. He felt the doctor's cool stare and looking at him forced his lips to a smile, but it was a painful little smile, oddly appealing and pathetic. The beer by his side was untouched.

"Anything in the paper?" asked the doctor.

Fred suddenly flushed scarlet.

"No, nothing. They've had the elections."

"Where?"

"New South Wales. Labour's got in."

"Are you Labour?"

Fred hesitated a little, and into his eyes came that watchful look that the doctor had seen in them once or twice before.

"I'm not interested in politics," he said. "I don't know anything about them."

"You might let me have a look at the paper."

Fred took a copy from the bundle and handed it to the doctor. But he did not take it.

"Is that the latest?"

"No, this is the latest," answered Fred, putting his hand on the one he had just been reading.

"If you've done with it I'll read that. I don't know that I'm very keen on news when it's too stale."

Fred hesitated for a second. The doctor held him with smiling but determined eyes. Obviously Fred could think of no plausible way to refuse the very natural request. He gave him the paper, and Dr. Saunders drew forward to the light to read it. Fred did not take up any of the other copies of the *Bulletin*, though certainly there were some he could not have seen, but sat pretending to look at the table, and the doctor was conscious that he was closely watching him from the sides of his eyes. There was no doubt that Fred had read in the paper he now held in his hand something that deeply concerned him. Dr. Saunders turned over the pages. There

was much election news. There was a London letter and a certain amount of cabled information from Europe and America. There was a good deal of local intelligence. He turned to the police news. The election had given rise to some disorder, and the courts had dealt with it. There had been a burglary at Newcastle. Some man had received a sentence for an insurance fraud. A stabbing affray between two Tonga Islanders was reported. Captain Nichols suspected that it was on account of murder that this disappearance of Fred had been arranged, and there were two columns about a murder that had taken place at a farmstead in the Blue Mountains, but this arose out of a quarrel between two brothers and the murderer, who had given himself up to the police, pleaded self-defence. Besides, it had taken place after Fred and Captain Nichols had sailed from Sydney. There was the report of an inquest on a woman who had hanged herself. For a moment Dr. Saunders wondered whether there was anything in this. *The Bulletin* is a weekly, of literary tendencies, and it dealt with the matter, not summarily, but in a fashion natural to a paper catering to a public to whom the facts in detail had been made known by the dailies. It appeared that the woman had been under suspicion of the murder of her husband some weeks before, but the evidence against her was too slight for the authorities to take action. She had been repeatedly examined by the police, and this, together with the gossip of neighbours and the scandal, had preyed on her mind. The jury found that she had committed suicide while temporarily insane. The coroner, commenting on the case, remarked that with her death vanished the last chance the police had of solving the mystery of the murder of Patrick Hudson. The doctor read the account again, reflectively; it was odd, but it was too brief to tell him much. The woman was forty-two. It seemed unlikely that a boy of Fred's age could have had anything to do with her. And, after all, Captain Nichols had nothing to go on; it was pure guesswork; the boy was an accountant; he might just as well have taken money that did not belong to him or, pressed by financial difficulties, forged a cheque. If he was connected with some important person politically, that might have been enough to make it advisable to spirit him away for a period. Dr. Saunders, putting the paper down, met Fred's eyes fixed upon him. He gave him a reassuring smile. His curiosity was disinterested, and he was not inclined to put himself to any trouble to gratify it.

"Going to dine at the hotel, Fred?" he asked.

"I'd ask you both to stay and have pot-luck with me here," said the Dane, "but I'm going up to have supper with Frith."

"Well, we'll be toddling."

The doctor and Fred walked a few steps in silence along the dark street.

"I don't want any dinner," the boy said suddenly. "I can't face Nichols to-night. I'm going for a tramp."

Before Dr. Saunders could answer he had turned on his heel and rapidly walked away. The doctor shrugged his shoulders and continued on his unhurried way.

CHAPTER XVIII

HE was drinking a gin pahit before dinner, on the veranda of the hotel, when Captain Nichols strolled up. He had washed and shaved, he was wearing a khaki stengah-shifter, with his topi set at a rakish angle, so that he looked quite spruce. He reminded you of a gentlemanly pirate.

"Feelin' better to-night," he remarked as he sat down, "and quite peckish, to tell you the truth. I don't believe the wing of a chicken could do me any 'arm. Where's Fred?"

"I don't know. He's off somewhere."

"Lookin' for a girl? I don't blame him. Though I don't know what he thinks he's goin' to find in a place like this. Risky, you know."

The doctor ordered him a drink.

"I was a rare one for the girls when I was a young fellow. Got a way with me, you know. The mistake I made was to marry. If I 'ad my time over again . . . I never tell you about my old woman, Doc."

"Enough," said the doctor.

"That's impossible. I couldn't do that, not if I was to tell you about 'er till to-morrow morning. If ever there was a devil in 'uman form, it's my old woman. I ask you, is it fair to treat a man like that? She's directly responsible for my indigestion; I'm just as sure of that as I am that I'm sittin' and talkin' to you. It's 'umiliatin', that's what it is. I'm surprised I 'aven't killed her. I would 'ave, too, only I know that if I was to start anything, and she said to me: 'You put that knife down, Captain,' I'd put it down. Now I

ask you, is it natural? And then she'd just start on me. And if I was to edge towards the door, she'd say: 'No, you don't, you stay 'ere till I've said all I've got to say to you, and when I've finished with you, I'll tell you.' "

They dined together, and the doctor lent a sympathetic ear to the recital of Captain Nichols's domestic infelicity. Then they sat again on the veranda, smoking Dutch cigars, and drank Schnapps with their coffee. Alcohol mellowed the skipper, and he grew reminiscent. He told the doctor stories of his early days on the coast of New Guinea and about the islands. He was a racy talker, with an ironic vein of humour, and it was diverting to listen to him, since false shame never tempted him to depict himself in a flattering light. It never occurred to him that anyone would hesitate to diddle another if he had the chance, and he felt just the same satisfaction in the success of a dirty trick as a chess-player might in winning a game by a bold and ingenious move. He was a scamp, but a courageous one. Dr. Saunders found a peculiar savour in his conversation when he remembered the splendid self-confidence with which he had weathered the storm. It had been impossible then not to be impressed by his readiness, resource and coolness.

Presently the doctor found occasion to slip in a question that had been for some time on the tip of his tongue.

"Did you ever know a fellow called Patrick Hudson?"

"Patrick 'udson?"

"He was a resident magistrate in New Guinea at one time. He's been dead a good many years now."

"That's a funny coincidence. No, I didn't know 'im. There was a fellow called Patrick 'udson in Sydney. Come to a sticky end."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Not so very long before we sailed. The papers was full of it."

"He might have been some relation of the man I mean."

"He was what they call a rough diamond. Been a railway man, they said, and worked 'is way up. Took up politics and all that. He was member for some place. Labour, of course."

"What happened to him?"

"Well, 'e was shot. With his own gun, if I remember right."

"Suicide?"

"No, they said 'e couldn't 'a' done it 'imself. I don't know any more than you do what 'appened, on account of my leavin' Sydney. It made quite a sensation."

"Was he married?"

"Yes. A lot of people thought 'is old woman done it. They couldn't prove anythin'. She'd been to the pictures, and when she come 'ome she found 'im lyin' there. There'd been a fight. The furniture was all over the shop. I never thought it was 'is old woman meself. My experience is they don't let you off so easy. They want to keep you alive as long as they can. They ain't going to lose their fun by puttin' you out of your misery."

"Still, a lot of women have murdered their husbands," objected the doctor.

"Pure accident. We all know that accidents will 'appen in the best regulated families. Sometimes they get careless and go too far, and then the poor bastard dies. But they don't mean it. Not them."

CHAPTER XIX

DR. SAUNDERS was fortunate in this, that, notwithstanding the several deplorable habits he had, and in some parts of the world they would certainly have been accounted vices (*vérité au delà des Alpes, erreur ici*), he awoke in the morning with a clean tongue and in a happy frame of mind. He seldom stretched himself in bed, drinking his cup of fragrant China tea and smoking the first delicious cigarette, without looking forward with pleasure to the coming day. Breakfast in the little hotels in the islands of the Dutch East Indies is served at a very early hour. It never varies. Papaia, *œufs sur le plat*, cold meat, and Edam cheese. However punctually you appear, the eggs are cold; they stare at you, two large round yellow eyes on a thin surface of white, and they look as if they had been scooped out of the face of an obscene monster of the deep. The coffee is an essence to which you add Nestlé's Swiss Milk brought to a proper consistency with hot water. The toast is dry, sodden and burnt. Such was the breakfast served in the dining-room of the hotel at Kanda and hurriedly eaten by silent Dutchmen, who had their offices to go to.

But Dr. Saunders got up late next morning, and Ah Kay brought him his breakfast out on the veranda. He enjoyed his papaia, he enjoyed his eggs, that moment out of the frying-pan, and he enjoyed his scented tea. He reflected that to live was a very enjoyable affair. He wanted nothing. He envied no man. He had

no regrets. The morning was still fresh and in the clear, pale light the outline of things was sharp-edged. A huge banana just below the terrace with a haughty and complacent disdain flaunted its splendid foliage to the sun's fierce heat. Dr. Saunders was tempted to philosophise: he said that the value of life lay not in its moments of excitement but in its placid intervals when, untroubled, the human spirit in tranquillity undisturbed by the recollection of emotion could survey its being with the same detachment as the Buddha contemplated his navel. Plenty of pepper on the eggs, plenty of salt and a little Worcester sauce, and then when they were finished a piece of bread to soak up the buttery remains, and that was the best mouthful of all. He was intent on this when Fred Blake and Erik Christessen came swinging down the street. They leaped up the steps and, throwing themselves on chairs at the doctor's table, shouted for the boy. They had started for their walk up the volcano before dawn, and were now ravenous. The boy hurried out with papaia and a dish of cold meats, and they finished this before he brought them eggs. They were in great spirits. The enthusiasm of youth had ripened the acquaintance made the day before into friendship, and they called one another Fred and Erik. It was a stiff climb and the violent exercise had excited them. They talked nonsense and laughed at nothing. They were like a couple of boys. The doctor had never seen Fred so gay. He was evidently much taken with Erik, and the companionship of someone only a little older than himself had loosened his constraint so that he seemed to flower with a new adolescence. He looked so young that you could hardly believe he was a grown man, and his deep, ringing voice sounded almost comic.

"D'you know, he's as strong as an ox, this blighter," said he, with a glance of admiration at Erik. "We had one rather nasty little bit of climbing to do, a branch broke and I slipped. I might have taken a nasty toss, broken my leg or something. Erik caught hold of me with one arm, damned if I know how he did it, and lifted me right up and set me on my feet again. And I weigh a good eleven stone."

"I've always been strong," smiled Erik.

"Put your hand up."

Fred placed his elbow on the table and Erik did the same. They put palm to palm and Fred tried to force Erik's arm down. He put all his strength into the effort. He could not move it. Then with a

little smile the Dane pressed back and gradually Fred's arm was forced to the table.

"I'm like a kid beside you," he laughed. "Gosh, a fellow wouldn't stand much chance if you hit him. Ever been in a fight?"

"No. Why should I?"

He finished eating and lit a cheroot.

"I must go to my office," he said. "Frith says, will you all go up there this afternoon? He wants us to have supper with him."

"Suits me all right," said the doctor.

"And the captain, too. I'll come for you about four."

Fred watched him go.

"Perfect loon," he said, turning to the doctor, with a smile. "My belief is he isn't all there."

"Oh, why?"

"The way he talked."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, I don't know. Crazy. He asked me about Shakespeare. A fat lot I know about Shakespeare. I told him I'd read *Henry V* when I was at school (we took it one term), and he began spouting one of the speeches. Then he started talking about *Hamlet* and *Othello* and heaven knows what. He knows yards of them by heart. I can't tell you all he said about them. I never heard anyone talk in that way before. And the funny thing was that, although it was all a lot of bunk, you didn't want to tell him to shut up."

A smile lingered in his candid blue eyes, but his face was serious.

"You've never been in Sydney, have you?"

"No."

"We have quite a literary and artistic set there. Not much in my line, but sometimes I couldn't help myself. Women chiefly, you know. They'd talk a lot of tosh about books and then, before you knew where you were, they'd be wanting to pop into bed with you."

"The Philistine dots his i's and crosses his t's with a definiteness that is unbecoming," reflected the doctor, "and when he sees a nail he hits it on the head."

"You get rather leery of them. But, I don't know how to explain it exactly, when Erik talked about all that it was different. He wasn't showing off and he wasn't trying to impress me. He just talked like that because he couldn't help it. He didn't mind if I was bored or not. He was so keen on it all it never struck him,

perhaps, I didn't care a damn about it. I didn't understand the half of what he said, you know, but somehow, I don't know, it was as good as a play, if you understand what I mean."

Fred threw out his observations like stones that you dig up in a garden to prepare the ground for planting and cast in a heap one after the other. In his perplexity he vigorously scratched his head. Dr. Saunders watched him with cool, shrewd eyes. The boy was tongue-tied, and it was diverting in his confused remarks to discover the emotion he was trying to put in words. Critics divide writers into those who have something to say and do not know how to say it, and those who know how to say it and have nothing to say. Often it is the same with men, with Anglo-Saxons at all events, to whom words come difficultly. When a man is fluent it is sometimes because he has said a thing so often that it has lost its meaning, and his speech is most significant when he has to fashion it laboriously from thoughts to which he can see no clear outline.

Fred gave the doctor a puckish glance that made him look like a mischievous boy.

"D'you know, he's lending me *Othello*. I don't exactly know why, but I said I wouldn't mind reading it. You've read it, I suppose."

"Thirty years ago."

"Of course I may be mistaken, but when Erik was spouting great chunks of it, it sounded quite exciting. I don't know what it is, but when you're with a chap like that everything seems different. I dare say he's crazy, but I wish there were a few more like him."

c "You've taken quite a fancy to him, haven't you?"

"Well, you can hardly help it," answered Fred, with a sudden attack of shyness. "You'd be a perfect damn fool not to see he's as straight as a die. I'd trust him with every penny I had in the world. He couldn't do anyone down. And you know, the funny thing is, though he's such a big hulking fellow and as strong as an ox, you have a sort of feeling you want to take care of him. I know it sounds silly, but you can't help feeling he oughtn't to be allowed about by himself; someone ought to be there to see that he doesn't get into trouble."

The doctor, with his cynical detachment, translated in his own mind the young Australian's awkward phrases into sense. He was surprised and a trifle touched by the emotion that with this shy clumsiness fought for expression. For what emerged from those hackneyed words was the shock of admiration the lad had received

when he was confronted with the realisation of something quite startling. Through the oddness of the huge, ungainly Dane, lighting up his complete sincerity, giving body to his idealism and charm to his extravagant enthusiasm, shone, with a warm, all-embracing glow, pure goodness. Fred Blake's youth made him mystically able to see it, and he was amazed by it and baffled. It touched him and made him feel very shy. It shook his self-confidence and humbled him. At that moment the rather ordinary, handsome boy was conscious of something he had never imagined, spiritual beauty.

"Who would have thought it possible?" reflected the doctor.

His own feelings towards Erik Christessen, naturally enough, were more detached. He was interested in him because he was a little unusual. It was amusing, to begin with, in an island of the Malay Archipelago, to come across a trader who knew Shakespeare well enough to say long passages by heart. The doctor could not but look on it as a somewhat tiresome accomplishment. He wondered idly if Erik was a good business man. He was not very fond of idealists. It was difficult for them in this workaday world to reconcile their professions with the exigencies of life, and it was disconcerting how often they managed to combine exalted notions with a keen eye to the main chance. The doctor had often found here cause for amusement. They were apt to look down upon those who were occupied with practical matters but not averse from profiting by their industry. Like the lilies of the field they neither toiled nor spun, but took it as a right that others should perform for them these menial offices.

"Who is this fellow Frith that we're going up to this afternoon?" asked the doctor.

"He's got a plantation. He grows nutmeg and cloves. He's a widower. He lives there with his daughter."

CHAPTER XX

It was about three miles to Frith's house, and they drove out in an old Ford. On each side of the road grew densely huge trees, and there was a heavy undergrowth of ferns and creepers. The jungle began at the outskirts of the town. Here and there were miserable huts. Ragged Malays lay about the verandas and listless children.

played among the pigs under the piles. It was humid and sultry. The estate had once belonged to a perkenier, and it had a stucco gateway, massive but crumbling, of pleasing design. Over the archway on a tablet was the old burgher's name and the date of erection. They turned down an earth road and bumped along over ruts, hillocks and holes till they came to the bungalow. It was a large, square building not on piles, but on a foundation of masonry, covered with an atap roof and surrounded by a neglected garden. They drove up, the Malay driver sounding his horn with energy, and a man came out of the house and waved to them. It was Frith. He waited for them at the top of the steps that led down from the veranda, and as they came up and Erik mentioned their names, shook hands with them one by one.

"Delighted to see you. I haven't seen any Britishers for a year. Come in and have a drink."

He was quite a big man, but fat, with grey hair and a small grey moustache. He was growing bald and his forehead was imposing. His red face, shining with sweat, was unlined and round, so that at the first glance he looked almost boyish. He had a long yellow tooth in the middle of his mouth, which hung loosely, giving you the impression that with a sharp pull it would come out. He wore khaki shorts and a tennis shirt open at the neck. He walked with a pronounced limp. He led them into a very large room, which served at once as parlour and dining-room; the walls were adorned with Malay weapons, antlers of deer and horns of *sladang*. On the floor were tiger skins that looked a trifle mouldy and moth-eaten. When they entered a tiny little old man got up from a chair and without taking a step towards them stood and looked at them. He was wrinkled, battered and bowed. He seemed very old.

"This is Swan," said Frith, with a casual nod of his head. "He's by way of being my father-in-law."

The little old man had very pale blue eyes with red-rimmed, hairless lids, but they were full of cunning, and his glance was darting and mischievous like a monkey's. He shook hands with the three strangers without speaking and then, opening a toothless mouth, addressed Erik in a language the others did not understand.

"Mr. Swan is a Swede," said Erik in explanation.

The old man eyed them one after the other, and in his gaze was a certain suspicion and at the same time, hardly concealed, something of mockery.

"I came out fifty years ago. I was mate of a sailing vessel. I never been back. Maybe I go next year."

"I'm a seafarin' man meself, sir," said Captain Nichols.

But Mr. Swan was not in the least interested in him.

"I been pretty well most things in my day," he went on. "I been captain of a schooner in the slave trade."

"Blackbirding," interrupted Captain Nichols. "There was a nice little bit of money to be picked up that way in the old days."

"I been a blacksmith. I been a trader. I been a planter. I don't know what I haven't been. They tried to kill me over and over again. I got a hernia on my chest, I have. That come from a wound I got in a scrap with the natives in the Solomons. Left me for dead, they did. I've had a lot of money in my time. Haven't I, George?"

"So I've always heard."

"Ruined by the great hurricane, I was. Destroyed my store. Lost everything. I didn't care. Got nothing left now but this plantation. Never mind, it gives us enough to live on and that's all that matters. I've had four wives and more children than you can count."

He talked in a high cracked voice with a strong Swedish accent, so that you had to listen intently to understand what he said. He spoke very quickly, almost as though he were reciting a lesson, and he finished with a little cackle of senile laughter. It seemed to say that he had been through everything and it was all stuff, and nonsense. He surveyed human kind and its activities from a great distance, but from no Olympian height, from behind a tree, slyly, and hopping from one foot to another with amusement.

A Malay brought in a bottle of whisky and a syphon, and Frith poured out the drinks.

"A drop of Scotch for you, Swan?" he suggested to the old man.

"Why do you ask me that, George?" he quavered. "You know very well I can't abide it. Give me some rum and water. Scotch has been the ruin of the Pacific. When I first come from Sweden nobody drunk Scotch. Rum. If they'd stuck to rum and stuck to sail, things wouldn't be what they are now, not by a long way."

"We ran into some pretty rough weather on the way 'ere," Captain Nichols remarked, by way of making conversation with a fellow seaman.

"Rough weather? You don't have rough weather nowadays.

You should have seen the weather you had when I was a boy. I remember on one of the schooners I had, I was taking a parcel of labour to Samoa, from the New Hebrides, and we got caught in a hurricane. I told them savages to pop over the side pretty damn quick, and I put out to sea, and for three days I never closed my eyes. Lost our sails, lost our mainmast, lost our boats. Rough weather! Don't talk to me about rough weather, young fellow."

"No offence meant," said Captain Nichols, with a grin that showed his broken, decayed little teeth.

"And no offence taken," cackled old Swan. "Give him a tot of rum, George. If he's a sailor-man he don't want that stinking whisky of yours."

Presently Erik suggested that the strangers would like to walk round the plantation.

"They've never seen a nutmeg estate."

"Take 'em over, George. Twenty-seven acres. Best land on the island," said the old man. "Bought it thirty years ago for a parcel of pearls."

They got up, leaving him, like a little strange bald bird, hunched up over his rum and water, and walked out into the garden. It ended casually and the plantation began. In the cool of the evening the air was limpid. The kanari trees, in the shade of which grew the portly and profitable nutmeg trees, were enormously tall. They towered like the columns of a mosque in the Arabian Nights. Underfoot was no tangle of undergrowth but a carpet of decaying leaves. You heard the boom of great pigeons and saw them flying about with a heavy whirr of wings. Little green parrots in flocks flitted swiftly over the nutmeg trees, screeching, and they were like living jewels darting through the softly sparkling air. Dr. Saunders had a sense of extreme well-being. He felt like a disembodied spirit and his imagination was pleasantly, but not exhaustingly, occupied with image after image. He walked with Frith and the skipper. Frith was explaining the details of the nutmeg trade. He did not listen. There was an idle sensuousness in the air that was almost material, so that it reminded you of the feel of a soft, rich fabric. Erik and Fred were walking a step behind. The declining sun had found a way under the branches of the lofty kanaris and shone on the foliage of the nutmeg trees so that their dense, opulent green glistened like burnished copper.

They strolled along a winding path, made by the accident of people having long followed it, and all at once saw a girl coming

towards them. She was walking with eyes cast down, as though absorbed in thought, and it was not till she heard voices that she looked up. She stopped.

"There is my daughter," said Frith.

You might have fancied she had stopped in a momentary embarrassment at the sight of strangers; but she did not move on, she stayed still, watching with a singular calm the men who advanced towards her; and then you received an impression, not exactly of self-assurance, but of tranquil unconcern. She wore nothing but a sarong of Javanese batik, with a little white pattern on a brown ground; it was attached tightly just over her breasts and came down to her knees. She was barefoot. Beside the little smile that hovered on her lips, the only sign she gave that she noticed the approach of strangers was a little shake of the head, almost involuntary, to loosen her hair and an instinctive gesture of the hand through it, for it was long and hung down her back. It spread in a cloud over her neck and shoulders, very thick, and of a fairness so ashy pale that, but for its radiance, it would have looked white. She waited with composure. The sarong tightly wrapped round her concealed nothing of her form; she was very slim, with the narrow hips of a boy, long-legged, and at first sight tall. She was burned by the sun to a rich honey colour. The doctor was not as a rule captivated by feminine beauty; he could not but think the manner in which a woman's frame was made for obvious physiological purposes much detracted from its æsthetic appeal. Just as a table should be solid, of a convenient height and roomy, so a woman should be large-breasted and broad in the beam; but in both cases beauty could only be an adjunct to utility. You might say that a table which was solid, roomy and of a convenient height was beautiful, but the doctor preferred to say that it was solid, roomy and of a convenient height. The girl standing there in an attitude of indolent beauty reminded him of some statue he had seen in a museum of a goddess attaching her peplum; he could not remember it very exactly. Greco-Roman, he thought. She had the same ambiguous slenderness as the little Chinese girls in the flower-boats at Canton, in whose company in his younger days he had on occasion passed moments of somewhat detached amusement. She had the same flower-like grace, and her fairness in that tropic scene gave the exotic sensation that made them so charming. She recalled to his mind the pale, profuse, delicate flowers of the plumbago.

"These are Christessen's friends," said her father as they came up to her.

She did not hold out her hand, but slightly and graciously inclined her head as first the doctor and then Captain Nichols were introduced to her. She gave them both a cool survey in which was enquiry and then swift appraisal. Dr. Saunders noticed that her brown hands were long and slender. Her eyes were blue. Her features were fine and very regular. She was an extremely pretty young woman.

"I've just been having a bathe in the pool," she said.

Her glance travelled to Erik, and she gave him a very sweet and friendly smile.

"This is Fred Blake," he said.

She turned her head a little to look at him, and for an appreciable time her eyes rested on him. The smile died away on her lips.

"Pleased to meet you," said Fred, holding out his hand.

She continued to look at him, not with pertness or brazenly, but as though she were a little surprised. You might have thought she had seen him before and was trying to remember where. But the incident lasted no more than a minute, and no one would have been conscious of a pause before she took the proffered hand.

"I was just going back to the house to dress," she said.

"I'll come with you," said Erik.

Now that he stood beside her you saw that she was not really very tall; it was only her straightness of limb, her slenderness and her carriage, that gave the impression of more than common height.

They sauntered back towards the house.

"Who is that boy?" she asked.

"I don't know," answered Erik. "He's in partnership with the thin, grey one. They're looking for pearl-shell. They're trying to find some new beds."

"He's good-looking."

"I thought you'd like him. He's got a nice nature."

The others continued their tour of the estate.

CHAPTER XXI

WHEN they came in they found Erik sitting alone with Swan. The old man was telling an interminable story, in an odd mixture of Swedish and English, of some adventure he had had in New Guinea.

"Where's Louise?" asked Frith.

"I've been helping her to lay the table. She's been doing something in the kitchen and now she's gone to change."

They sat down and had another drink. They talked somewhat desultorily, as people do when they don't know one another. Old Swan was tired, and when the strangers appeared lapsed into silence, but he watched them, with his sharp, rheumy eyes, as though they filled him with suspicion. Captain Nichols told Frith that he was a martyr to dyspepsia.

"I've never known what it is to have a pain in my tummy," said Frith. "Rheumatism's my trouble."

"I've known men as was martyrs to it. A friend of mine at Brisbane, one of the best pilots in the business, was just crippled by it. Had to go about on crutches."

"One has to have something," said Frith.

"You can't 'ave anythin' worse than dyspepsia, you take my word for it. I'd be a rich man now if it 'adn't been for my dyspepsia."

"Money's not everything," said Frith.

"I'm not sayin' it is. I'm sayin' I'd 'ave been a rich man to-day if it 'adn't been for my dyspepsia."

"Money's never meant anything very much to me. So long as I have a roof over my head and three meals a day I'm content. Leisure's the important thing."

Dr. Saunders listened to the conversation. He could not quite place Frith. He spoke like an educated man. Though fat and gross, shabbily dressed and in want of a shave, he gave the impression, scarcely of distinction, but of being accustomed to the society of decent people. He certainly did not belong to the same class as old Swan and Captain Nichols. His manners were easy. He had welcomed them with courtesy and treated them not with the fussy politeness an ill-bred person thinks it necessary to use towards strange guests, but naturally, as though he knew the ways of the world. Dr. Saunders supposed that he was what in the

England of his youth they would have called a gentleman. He wondered how he had found his way to that distant island. He got up from his chair and wandered about the room. A number of framed photographs hung on the wall over a long book-case. He was surprised to find that they were of rowing eights of a Cambridge college, among which, though only by the name underneath, G. P. Frith, he recognised his host; others were groups of native boys at Perak in the Malay States, and at Kuching in Sarawak, with Frith, a much younger man than now, sitting in the middle. It looked as though on leaving Cambridge he had come to the East as a schoolmaster. The book-case was untidily stacked with books, all stained with damp and the ravages of the white ant, and these, with idle curiosity, taking out one here, one there, he glanced at. There was a number of prizes bound in leather from which he learned that Frith had been at one of the smaller public schools, and had been an industrious and even brilliant boy. There were the text-books that he had used at Cambridge, a good many novels, and a few volumes of poetry which gave the impression that they had been much read, but long ago. They were well-thumbed and many passages were marked in pencil or underlined, but they had a musty smell as though they had for years remained unopened. But what surprised him most was to see two shelves filled with works on Indian religion and Indian philosophy. There were translations of the Rig-Veda and of certain of the Upanishads, and there were paper-bound books published in Calcutta or Bombay by authors with names odd to him and with titles that had a mystical sound. It was an unusual collection to find in the house of a planter in the Far East, and Dr. Saunders, trying to make something of the indications they afforded, asked himself what sort of man they suggested. He was turning the pages of a book by one Srinivasa Iyengar called *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, when Frith somewhat heavily limped up to him.

"Having a look at my library?"

"Yes."

He glanced at the volume the doctor was holding.

"Interesting. Those Hindus, they're marvellous; they have a natural instinct for philosophy. They make all our philosophers look cheap and obvious. Their subtlety is so amazing. Plotinus is the only fellow I know to compare with them." He replaced the book on a shelf. "Of course, Brahma is the only religion that a reasonable man can accept without misgiving."

The doctor gave him a sidelong glance. With his red, round face, and that long yellow tooth hanging loose in his jaw, his baldish head, he had none of the look of a man with spiritual leanings. It was surprising to hear him talk in this strain.

"When I consider the universe, those innumerable worlds and the vast distances of interstellar space, I cannot think it the work of a creator, and if it were, then I am forced to ask who or what created the creator. The Vedanta teaches that in the beginning was the existent, for how could the existent be born from the non-existent? And this existent was Atman, the supreme spirit, from whom emanated maya, the illusion of the phenomenal world. And when you ask those wise men of the East why the supreme spirit should have sent forth this phantasmagory they will tell you it was for his diversion. For being complete and perfect, he could not be actuated by aim or motive. Aim and motive imply desire and he that is perfect and complete needs neither change nor addition. Therefore the activity of the eternal spirit has no purpose, but, like the frolic of princes or the play of children, is spontaneous and exultant. He sports in the world, he sports in the soul."

"That is an explanation of things that does not entirely displease me," the doctor murmured, smiling. "There is a futility about it that gratifies the sense of irony."

But he was watchful and suspicious. He was conscious that he would have attached more significance to what Frith said had he been of ascetic appearance, and his face, instead of shining with sweat, shone with the travail of urgent thought. But does the outer man represent the man within? The face of a scholar or a saint may well mask a vulgar and a trivial soul. Socrates, with his flattened nose and protruding eyes, his thick lips and unwieldy belly, looked like Silenus, and yet was full of admirable temperance and wisdom.

Frith gave a little sigh.

"For a time I was attracted by Yoga, but after all it's only a schismatic branch of Sankhya, and its materialism is unreasonable. All that mortification of the senses is inane. The goal is perfect knowledge of the soul's nature, and apathy and abstraction and rigidity of posture will not enable you to attain that any more than rites and ceremonies. I've got masses of notes. When I have time I shall get some sort of order in my material and write a book. I've had it in mind for twenty years."

"I should have thought you had time to burn here," said the doctor dryly.

"Not enough for all I have to do. I've been spending the last four years doing a metrical translation of *The Lusiads*. Camoens, you know. I should like to read you one or two cantos. There's no one here who has any critical discernment. Christessen is a Dane, and I can't trust his ear."

"But hasn't it been translated before?"

"Yes. By Burton, among others. Poor Burton was no poet. His version is intolerable. Every generation must retranslate the great works of the world for itself. My aim is not only to render the sense, but also to preserve the rhythm and music and lyrical quality of the original."

"What made you think of it?"

"It's the last of the great epics. After all, my book on the Vedanta can only hope to appeal to a small and special public. I felt I owed it to my daughter to undertake a work of more popular character. I have nothing. This estate belongs to old Swan. My translation of *The Lusiads* shall be her dowry. I am going to give her every penny I make out of it. But that is not all; money isn't very important. I want her to be proud of me; I don't think my name will be very easily forgotten: my fame also shall be her dowry."

Dr. Saunders kept silence. It seemed to him fantastic that this man should expect to get money and fame by translating a Portuguese poem that not a hundred people had any wish to read. He shrugged a tolerant shoulder.

"It is strange how things happen," Frith continued, his face heavy and serious. "It's hard for me to believe that it is only by accident that I have undertaken this task. You know, of course, that Camoens, a soldier of fortune as well as a poet, came to this island, and he must often have watched the sea from the fort as I have watched it. Why should I have come here? I was a school-master. When I left Cambridge I had an opportunity to come to the East, and I jumped at it. I'd longed to ever since I was a child. But the routine of school-work was too much for me. I couldn't bear the people I had to mix with. I was in the Malay States, and then I thought I'd try Borneo. It was no better. At last I couldn't stand it any more. I resigned. For some time I was in an office in Calcutta. Then I started a book-shop in Singapore. But it didn't pay. I ran a hotel in Bali, but I was before my time, and I couldn't

make both ends meet. At last I drifted down here. It's strange that my wife should have been called Catherine, because that was the name of the only woman Camoens loved. It was for her he wrote his perfect lyrics. Of course, if there's anything that seems to me proved beyond all doubt it's the doctrine of transmigration which the Hindus call Samsara. Sometimes I've asked myself if perhaps the spark that issued from the fire and formed the spirit of Camoens is not the self-same spark that now forms mine. So often when I'm reading *The Lusiads* I come across a line that I seem to remember so distinctly that I can't believe I'm reading it for the first time. You know that Pedro de Alcaçova said that *The Lusiads* had only one fault. They were not short enough to learn by heart and not long enough to have no ending."

He gave a deprecating smile as a man might to whom an extravagant compliment was addressed.

"Ah, here's Lōuise," he said. "That looks as if supper was nearly ready."

Dr. Saunders turned to look at her. She was wearing a sarong of green silk in which was woven an elaborate pattern in gold thread. It had a sleek and glowing splendour. It was Javanese, and such as the ladies of the Sultan's harem at Djokjakarta wore on occasions of state. It fitted her slim body like a sheath, tight over her young nipples and tight over her narrow hips. Her bosom and her legs were bare. She wore high-heeled green shoes, and they added to her graceful stature. That ashy blonde hair of hers was done high on her head, but very simply, and the sober brilliance of the green-and-golden sarong enhanced its astonishing fairness. Her beauty took the breath away. The sarong had been kept with sweet-smelling essences or she had scented herself; when she joined them they were conscious of a faint and unknown perfume. It was languorous and illusive, and it was pleasant to surmise that it was made from a secret recipe in the palace of one of the rajahs of the islands.

"What's the meaning of this fancy dress?" asked Frith, with a smile in his pale eyes and a waggle of his long tooth.

"Erik gave me this sarong the other day. I thought it would be a good opportunity to wear it."

She gave the Dane a friendly little smile that thanked him again.

"It's an old one," said Frith. "It must have cost you a small fortune, Christessen. You'll spoil the child."

"I got it for a bad debt. I couldn't resist it. I know. Louise likes green."

A Malay servant brought in a great bowl of soup and set it down on the table.

"Will you take Dr. Saunders on your right, Louise, and Captain Nichols on your left?" said Frith, with a certain stateliness.

"What does she want to sit between those two old men for?" cackled the ancient Swan suddenly. "Let her sit between Erik and the kid."

"I see no reason not to conform to the usages of polite society," said Frith in a very dignified manner.

"Want to show off?"

"Then will you sit beside me, Doctor?" said Frith, taking no notice of this. "And perhaps Captain Nichols wouldn't mind sitting on my left."

Old Swan, with a funny quick crawl, took what was evidently his accustomed place. Frith ladled out the soup.

"Pair of crooks they look to me," said the little old man, shooting a sharp glance from the doctor to Nichols. "Where'd you fish 'em from, Erik?"

"You're ginny, Mr. Swan," said Frith, handing him gravely a plate of soup to be passed down the table.

"No offence meant," said Mr. Swan.

"And no offence taken," answered Captain Nichols, graciously. "I'd ever so much sooner somebody said I looked like a crook than I looked like a fool. And I'm sure the doctor'll say the same as me. What does a fellow mean when 'e says you're a crook? Well, 'e means you're cleverer than 'im, that's all; I ask you, am I right or am I wrong?"

"I know a crook when I see one," said old Swan. "I've known too many in my time not to. Been a bit of a crook meself at times."

He gave a little cackling laugh.

"And who hasn't?" said Captain Nichols, wiping his mouth, for he ate soup somewhat untidily. "What I always say is, you must take the world as you find it. Compromise, that's the thing. Ask anybody and they'll tell you what made the British Empire what it is, is compromise."

With a deft movement of his lower lip Frith sucked the remains of his soup off his little grey moustache.

"It's a matter of temperament, I suppose. Compromise has never appealed to me. I have had other fish to fry."

"Someone else caught 'em for you, I bet," said old Swan, with a little snicker of senile glee. "Bone-idle, that's what you are, George. Had a dozen jobs in your time and never kept one of them."

Frith gave Dr. Saunders an indulgent smile. It said as clearly as if he had spoken that it was mightily absurd to hurl such charges at a man who had spent twenty years in the study of the highly metaphysical thought of the Hindus and in whom in all probability dwelt the spirit of a celebrated Portuguese poet.

"My life has been a journey in search of truth and there can be no compromise with truth. The Europeans ask what is the use of truth, but for the thinkers of India it is not a means but an end. Truth is the goal of life. Years ago I used sometimes to hanker for the world I had left behind me. I would go down to the Dutch club and look at the illustrated papers, and when I saw pictures of London my heart ached. But now I know that it is only the recluse who enjoys the civilisation of cities to the full. At long last I have learnt that it is we exiles from life who get most value from it. For the way of knowledge is the true way and that way passes every door."

But at that moment, three chickens, the scrawny, pallid, tasteless chickens of the East, were set before him. He rose from his chair and seized a carving knife.

"Ah, the duties and ceremonies of the householder," he said cheerfully.

Old Swan had been sitting silent, hunched up in his chair like a little gnome. He ate his soup greedily. Suddenly, in his thin cracked voice, he began to speak:

"I spent seven years in New Guinea, I did. I spoke every language they spoke in New Guinea. You go to Port Moresby and ask 'em about Jack Swan. They remember me. I was the first white man ever walked across the island. Moreton did it afterwards, unarmed, with a walking-stick, but he had his police with him. I did it by meself. Everyone thought I was dead, and when I walked into town they thought I was a ghost. Been shooting birds of paradise, we had, my mate and me, a New Zealander he was, been a bank-manager and got into some mess-up, we had our own cutter and we sailed along the coast from Merauke. Got a lot of birds. Worth a mint of money they was then. We was very friendly with the natives, used to give them a drink now and then, and a stick of tobacco. One day I'd been out shooting by myself

and I was coming back to the cutter, I was just going to give my mate a shout to come and fetch me in the dinghy when I see some natives on it. We never allowed them to come on board, and I thought something was up. So I just hid myself and stood there looking. I didn't half like the look of it. I crept along very quiet and I saw the dinghy pulled up on the beach. I thought my mate had come ashore and some of them natives had swum out to the cutter. I thought I wouldn't half give them what for. And then I bumped against something. My God, it did give me a turn. D'you know what it was? It was my mate's body, with the head cut off, and all a mass of blood from the wounds in his back. I didn't wait to see no more. I knew I'd go the same way if they caught me. They was waiting for me on the cutter, that's what they was doing. I'd got to get away and I'd got to get away damned quick. Rare time I had getting across. The things that happened to me! You could write a book about it. One old fellow, chief of a big village he was, took quite a fancy to me, wanted to adopt me and give me a couple of wives, said I'd be chief after him. I was nippy with my hands when I was a young fellow, having been a sailor and all that. I knew a lot. Nothing I couldn't do. Three months I stayed there. If I hadn't been a young fool I'd have stayed for good. Powerful chief he was. I might have been a king, I might. King of the Cannibal Islands."

He ended with his high-pitched cackle and relapsed into silence; but it was a strange silence, for he seemed to notice everything that was going on around him, and yet live his own life apart. The sudden burst of reminiscence, which had no connection with anything that had been said, had a sort of automatic effect as though a machine controlled by an unseen clock at intervals uncannily shot forth a stream of patter. Dr. Saunders was puzzled by Frith. What he said was on occasion not without interest; to the doctor, indeed, sometimes striking; and yet his manner and appearance predisposed you to listen to him warily. He seemed sincere, his attitude had even nobility, but there was something in him that the doctor found disconcerting. It was odd that these two men, old Swan and Frith, the man of action and the man who had devoted his life to speculation, should have ended up there, together, on this lonely island. It looked as though it all came to very much the same in the end. The end of all the adventurer's hazards, like the end of the philosopher's high thoughts, was a comfortable respectability.

Frith, having to his satisfaction divided three birds among seven people, sat down again and helped himself to boiled potatoes.

"I have always been attracted by the idea of the Brahmans, that a man should devote his youth to study," he said, turning to Dr. Saunders, "his maturity to the duties and ceremonies of a householder, and his age to abstract thought and meditation of the Absolute."

He glanced at old Swan, hunched up in his chair and laboriously gnawing a drumstick, and then at Louise.

"It will not be very long now before I am liberated from the obligations of my maturity. Then I shall take my staff and journey out into the world in search of the knowledge which passeth all understanding."

The doctor's eyes had followed Frith's, and they rested for a while on Louise. She sat at the end of the table between the two young men. Fred, as a rule, tongue-tied, was talking nineteen to the dozen. He had lost the slight sulkiness of expression that his features bore in repose and looked frank, care-free and boyish. His face was lit up by the play of his words and his desire to please lent a soft and engaging lustre to his fine eyes. Dr. Saunders, smiling, saw how taking was his charm. He was not shy with women. He knew how to amuse them and you had only to see the girl's easy gaiety, and her animation, to know that she was happy and interested. The doctor caught snatches of his conversation; it was about the races at Randwick, bathing at Manley Beach, the cinema, the amusements of Sydney; the sort of things that young people talk to one another about and because all experience is fresh to them find so absorbing. Erik, with his great clumsy size and his massive square head, a kindly smile on his pleasantly ugly face, sat watching Fred quietly. You could see that he was glad the boy he had brought to the house was going down well. It gave him a little warm feeling of self-satisfaction that he was so charming.

When dinner was finished, Louise went up to old Swan and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Now, Grandpa, you must go to bed."

"Not before I've had me tot of rum, Louise."

"Well, drink it up quick."

She poured him out the considerable amount he wanted, while he watched the glass with cunning, rheumy eyes, and added a little water.

"Put a tune on the gramophone, Erik," she said.

The Dane did as he was bid.

"Can you dance, Fred?" he asked.

"Can't you?"

"No."

Fred rose to his feet, and looking at Louise outlined a gesture of invitation. She smiled. He took her hand and put his arm round her waist. They began to dance. They made a lovely couple. Dr. Saunders, standing with Erik by the gramophone, saw to his surprise that Fred was an exquisite dancer. He had an unimaginable grace. He made his partner, not more than competent, appear to dance as well as he did. He had the gift of being able to absorb her movements into his so that she was instinctively responsive to the notions as they formed themselves in his brain. He made the fox-trot they danced a thing of the most delicate beauty.

"You're a pretty good dancer, young fellow," said Dr. Saunders, when the record came to an end.

"It's the only thing I can do," answered the boy, with a smile.

He was so well aware of his amiable gift that he took it as a matter of course and compliments upon it meant nothing to him. Louise looked down at the floor with a serious look on her face. Suddenly she seemed to rouse herself.

"I must go and put Grandfather to bed."

She went over to the old man, still hugging his empty glass, and, leaning over him, tenderly cajoled him to come with her. He took her arm and toddled, a foot shorter than she, out of the room beside her.

"What about a game of bridge?" said Frith. "Do you gentlemen play?"

"I do," said the skipper. "I don't know about the doctor and Fred."

"I'll make up a four," said Dr. Saunders.

"Christessen plays a very good game."

"I don't play," said Fred.

"That's all right," said Frith. "We can manage without you."

Erik brought forward a bridge table, its green baize patched and worn, and Frith produced two packs of greasy cards. They brought up chairs and cut for partners. Fred stood beside the gramophone, alert, as though his body were on springs, and with little movements kept time to an inaudible tune. When Louise came back he did not move, but in his eyes was a smile of goodwill.

It had a familiarity that was not offensive and it gave her the feeling that she had known him all her life.

"Shall I put on the gramophone?" he asked.

"No, they'll have a fit."

"We must have another dance."

"Dad and Erik take their bridge very seriously."

She walked over to the table and he accompanied her. He stood behind Captain Nichols for a few minutes. The skipper gave him one or two uneasy glances and then, having made a bad play, turned round irascibly.

"I can't do a thing with someone lookin' over me 'and," he said. "Nothin' puts me off like that."

"Sorry, old man."

"Let's go outside," said Louise.

The living-room of the bungalow opened on to a veranda, and they stepped out. Beyond the little garden you saw in the starlight the towering kanari trees and below them, thick and dark, the massy verdure of the nutmegs. At the bottom of the steps, on one side, grew a large bush and it was alight with fire-flies. There was a multitude of them and they sparkled softly. It was like the radiance of a soul at peace. They stood side by side for a little while looking at the night. Then he took her hand and led her down the steps. They walked along the pathway till they came to the plantation and she let her hand rest in his as though it were such a natural thing for him to hold it that she paid no attention.

"Don't you play bridge?" she asked.

"Yes, of course."

"Why aren't you playing, then?"

"I didn't want to."

It was very dark under the nutmeg trees. The great white pigeons that roosted in their branches were asleep, and the only sound that broke the silence was when one of them for some reason rustled its wings. There was not a breath of wind and the air, vaguely aromatic, had a warm softness so that it surrounded them sensible to the nerves of touch like water to the swimmer. Fire-flies hovered across the path with a sort of swaying movement that made you think of drunken men staggering down an empty street. They walked a little without saying a word. Then he stopped and took her gently in his arms and kissed her on the mouth. She did not start. She did not stiffen, with surprise, or modesty; she made no instinctive movement of withdrawal; she accepted his embrace

as though it were in the order of things. She was soft in his arms, but not weak, yielding, but yielding with a sort of tender willingness. They were accustomed to the darkness now, and when he looked into her eyes they had lost their blue and were dark and unfathomable. He had his hand round her waist and an arm round her neck. She rested her head against it comfortably.

"You are lovely," he said.

"You're awfully good-looking," she answered.

He kissed her again. He kissed her eyelids.

"Kiss me," he whispered.

She smiled. She took his face in her two hands and pressed her lips to his. He placed his hands on her two small breasts. She sighed.

"We must go in."

She took his hand and side by side they walked back slowly to the house.

"I love you," he whispered.

She did not answer, but tightly pressed his hand. They came into the light from the house, and when they went into the room for an instant were dazzled. Erik looked up as they entered and gave Louise a smile.

"Been down to the pool?"

"No, it was too dark."

She sat down and, taking up an illustrated Dutch paper, began to look at the pictures. Then putting it down she let her gaze rest on Fr  d. She stared at him thoughtfully, without expression on her face, as though he were not a man but an inanimate object. Now and then Erik glanced across at her and when he caught her eye she gave him a tiny little smile. Then she got up.

"I shall go to bed," she said.

She bade them all good-night. Fred sat down behind the doctor and watched them play. Presently, having finished a rubber, they stopped. The old Ford had come back for them and the four men piled in. When they reached the town it drew up to put the doctor and Erik down at the hotel and then drove on to the harbour with the others.

CHAPTER XXII

"ARE you sleepy?" asked Erik.

"No, it's early yet," replied the doctor.

"Come over to my place and have a night-cap."

"All right."

The doctor had not smoked for a night or two and intended to do so that evening, but he did not mind waiting a little. To delay the pleasure was to increase it. He accompanied Erik along the deserted street. People went to bed early at Kanda and there was not a soul about. The doctor walked with a little quick trip and he took two steps to Erik's one. With his short legs and somewhat prominent belly he cut a comic figure beside the striding giant. It was not more than two hundred yards to the Dane's house, but he was a little out of breath when they arrived. The door was unlocked, there was not much fear of thieves on that island where people could neither escape nor dispose of stolen property, and Erik, opening the door, walked in ahead to light the lamp. The doctor threw himself in the most comfortable of the chairs and waited while Erik fetched glasses, ice, whisky and soda. In the uncertain light of a paraffin lamp, with his short grey hair, snub nose and the bright colour on his high cheek-bones, he reminded you of an elderly chimpanzee, and his little bright eyes had the monkey's scintillating sharpness. It would have been a foolish man who thought they would not see through pretence, but perhaps it would have been a wise one who discerned that, however clumsily an awkward address concealed it, they would recognise sincerity. He was not likely to take at its face value what a man said, however plausible, though no more than the shadow of a mischievous smile betrayed his thoughts, but honesty, however naïve, and true feeling, however incongruous, he could repay with a sympathy somewhat ironical and amused, but patient and kindly.

Erik poured out a drink for his guest and a drink for himself.

"What about Mrs. Frith?" asked the doctor. "Is she dead?"

"Yes, she died last year. Heart disease. She was a fine woman. Her mother came from New Zealand, but to look at her you would have said she was pure Swedish. The real Scandinavian type, tall and big and fair, like one of the goddesses in the *Rheingold*. Old Swan used to say that when she was a girl she was better-looking than Louise."

"A very pretty young woman," said the doctor.

"She was like a mother to me. You can't imagine how kind she was. I used to spend all my spare time up there, and if I didn't go for a few days because I was afraid of abusing their hospitality she'd come down and fetch me herself. We Danes, you know, we think the Dutch are rather dull and heavy, and it was a godsend for me to have that house to go to. Old Swan used to like talking Swedish to me." Erik gave a little laugh. "He'd forgotten most of it, he talks half Swedish, half English, and Malay words thrown in and bits of Japanese; at first I had a job to understand. Funny how a man can forget his native language. I've always liked the English. It was fine for me to have long talks with Frith. You wouldn't expect to find a man with that education in a place like this."

"I was wondering how he ever found his way here."

"He'd read about it in some old travel book. He's told me he wanted to come ever since he was a kid. It's a funny thing, he'd got it into his head that it was the one place in the world he wanted to live in. And I'll tell you what's strange, he'd forgotten the name of it; he could never find again the book in which he'd read about it; he just knew there was an island all by itself in a little group somewhere between Celebes and New Guinea, where the sea was scented with spices and there were great marble palaces."

"It sounds more like the sort of thing you read about in *The Arabian Nights* than in a book of travel."

"That's what a good many people expect to find in the East."

"Sometimes they do," murmured the doctor.

He thought of the noble bridge that spanned the river at Fuchou. There was a press of traffic on the Min, great junks with eyes painted on their prows so that they could see the way to go, wupans with their rattan hoods, frail sampans and chugging motor-boats. On the barges dwelt the turbulent river-folk. In mid-stream on a raft two men, wearing nothing but a loin-cloth, fished with cormorants. It was a sight you could watch for an hour at a time. The fisherman sent his bird into the water; it dived, it caught; as it rose to the surface he drew it in by a string tied to its leg; then, while it struggled, angrily flapping its wings, he seized it by the throat and made it disgorge the fish it had seized. After all it was just such a fisherman, fishing in his different Arab way, to whom a casual chance brought such amazing adventures.

The Dane continued:

"He came out East when he was twenty-four. It took him twelve

years to get here. He asked everyone he met if they'd heard of the island, but you know, in the F.M.S. and in Borneo, they don't know much about these parts. He was a bit of a rolling-stone when he was a young chap and he wandered from place to place. You heard what old Swan said to him and I guess it was true. He never kept a job very long. He got here at last. The skipper of a Dutch ship told him about it. It didn't sound very much like the place he was looking for, but it was the only island in the Archipelago that answered to the description at all, and he thought he'd come and look at it. When he landed he hadn't much beside his books and the clothes he stood up in. At first he couldn't believe it was the right place; you've seen the marble palaces, you're sitting in one of them now." Erik looked round the room and laughed. "You see, he'd pictured them to himself all those years like the palaces on the Grand Canal. Anyhow, if it wasn't the place he was looking for it was the only place he could find. He shifted his standpoint, if you understand what I mean, and forced the reality to tally with his fancy. He came to the conclusion that it was all right. Because they've got marble floors and stucco columns he really thinks they are marble palaces."

"You make him out a wiser man than I thought he was."

"He got a job here, there was more trade then than there is now; after that, he fell in love with old Swan's daughter and married her."

"Were they happy together?"

"Yes. Swan didn't like him much. He was pretty active in those days and he was always concocting some scheme or other. He could never get Frith to get a move on. But she worshipped him. She thought he was wonderful. When Swan got too old, she ran the estate and looked after things and made both ends meet. You know, some women are like that. It gave her a sort of satisfaction to think of Frith sitting in his den with his books, reading and writing and making notes. She thought him a genius. She thought everything she did for him was only his due. She was a fine woman."

The doctor reflected on what Erik told him. What a picture of a strange life this offered to the fancy! The shabby bungalow in the nutmeg plantation, with the immensely tall kanari trees; that old pirate of a Swede, ruthless and crotchety, brave adventurer in the soulless deserts of hard fact; the dreamy, unpractical school-master, lured by the mirage of the East, who, like—like a coster's

donkey let loose on a common, wandered aimlessly in the pleasant lands of the spirit, browsing at random; and then, the great blonde woman, like a goddess of the Vikings, with her efficiency, her love, her honesty of mind, and surely her charitable sense of humour, who held things together, managed, guided and protected those two incompatible men.

"When she knew she was dying she made Louise promise to look after them. The plantation belongs to Swan. Even now it brings in enough to keep them all. She was afraid that after she was gone the old man would turn Frith out." Erik hesitated a little. "And she made me promise to look after Louise. It hasn't been very easy for her, poor child. Swan is like a cunning old monkey. He's up to any mischief. His brain in a way is as active as ever it was, and he'll lie and plot and intrigue just to play some silly little trick on you. He dotes on Louise. She's the only person who can do anything with him. Once, just for fun, he tore some of Frith's manuscripts into tiny fragments. When they found him he was surrounded by a snow-fall of little bits of paper."

"No great loss to the world, I dare say," smiled the doctor, "but exasperating to a struggling author."

"You don't think much of Frith?"

"I haven't made up my mind about him."

"He's taught me so much. I shall always be grateful to him. I was only a kid when I first came here. I'd been to the University at Copenhagen, and at home we'd always cared for culture; my father was a friend of George Brandes, and Holger Drachmann, the poet, used often to come to our house; it was Brandes who first made me read Shakespeare, but I was very ignorant and narrow. It was Frith who made me understand the magic of the East. You know, people come out here and they see nothing. Is that all? they say. And they go home again. That fort I took you to see yesterday, just a few old grey walls overgrown with weeds. I shall never forget the first time he took me there. His words built up the ruined walls and put ordnance on the battlements. When he told me how the governor had paced them week after week in sickening anxiety, for the natives, in the strange way they have in the East of knowing things before they can possibly be known, were whispering of a terrible disaster to the Portuguese, and he waited desperately for the ship that would bring news; and at last it came, and he read the letter which told him, that King Sebastian, with his splendid train of nobles and courtiers, had been

annihilated at the battle of Alcacer, and the tears ran down his old cheeks, not only because his King had met a cruel death, but because he foresaw that the defeat must cost his country her freedom; and that rich world they had discovered and conquered, those innumerable islands a handful of brave men had seized for the power of Portugal, must pass under the dominion of foreigners—then, believe me or not, I felt a lump in my throat, and for a little while I couldn't see because my eyes were blurred with tears. And not only this. He talked to me of Goa the Golden, rich with the plunder of Asia, the great capital of the East, and of the Malabar Coast and Macao, and Ormuz and Bassora. He made that old life so plain and vivid that I've never since been able to see the East but with the past still present to-day. And I've thought what a privilege it was that I, a poor Danish country boy, should see all these wonders with my own eyes. And I think it's grand to be a man when I think of those little swarthy chaps from a country no bigger than my own Denmark who, by their dauntless courage, their gallantry, their ardent imagination, held half the world in fee. It's all gone now and they say that Goa the Golden is no more than a poverty-stricken village; but if it's true that the only reality is spirit, then somehow that dream of empire, that dauntless courage, that gallantry, live on."

"It was strong wine for a young head that our Mr. Frith gave you to drink," murmured the doctor.

"It intoxicated me," smiled Erik, "but that intoxication causes no headache in the morning."

The doctor did not reply. He was inclined to think that its effects, more lasting, might be a great deal more pernicious. Erik took a sip of whisky.

"I was brought up a Lutheran, but when I went to the university I became an atheist. It was the fashion, and I was very young. I just shrugged my shoulders when Frith began to talk to me of Brahma. Oh, we've spent hours sitting on the veranda, up at the plantation, Frith, his wife Catherine and me. He'd talk. She never said much, but she listened, looking at him with adoring eyes, and he and I would argue. It was all vague and difficult to understand, but, you know, he was very persuasive, and what he believed had a sort of grandeur and beauty; it seemed to fit in with the tropical, moonlit nights and the distant stars and the murmur of the sea. I've often wondered if there isn't something in it. And if you know what I mean, it fits in too with Wagner and Shake-

speare's plays and those lyrics of Camoens. Sometimes I've grown impatient and said to myself: The man's an empty windbag. You see, it bothered me that he should drink more than was good for him, and be so fond of his food, and when there was a job of work to do always have an excuse for not doing it. But Catherine believed in him. She was no fool. If he'd been a fake she couldn't have lived with him for twenty years and not found it out. It was funny that he should be so gross and yet be capable of such lofty thoughts. I've heard him say things that I shall never forget. Sometimes he could soar into mystical regions of the spirit—d'you know what I mean?—when you couldn't follow him, but just watched dizzily from the ground and yet were filled with rapture. And, you know, he could do surprising things. That day that old Swan tore up his manuscript, a year's work, two whole cantos of *The Lusiads*, when they saw what had happened Catherine burst out crying, but he just sighed and went out for a walk. When he came in he brought the old man, delighted with his mischief, but a little scared all the same, a bottle of rum. It's true he'd bought it with Swan's money, but that doesn't matter. 'Never mind, old man,' he said, 'you've only torn up a few dozen sheets of paper; they were merely an illusion and it would be foolish to give them a second thought; the reality remains, for the reality is indestructible.' And next day he set to work to do it all over again."

"He said he was going to give me some passages to read," said Dr. Saunders. "I suppose he forgot."

"He'll remember," said Erik, with a smile in which there was a good-natured grimness.

Dr. Saunders liked him. The Dane was genuine, at all events; an idealist, of course, but his idealism was tempered with humour. He gave you the impression that his strength of character was greater even than the strength of his mighty frame. Perhaps he was not very clever, but he was immensely reliable, and the charm of his simple, honest nature pleasantly complemented the charm of his ungainly person. It occurred to the doctor that a woman might very well fall deeply in love with him and his next remark was not entirely void of guile.

"And that girl we saw, is that the only child they had?"

"Catherine was a widow when Frith married her. She had a son by her first husband, and a son by Frith, too, but they both died when Louise was a child."

"And has she looked after everything since her mother's death?"

"Yes."

"She's very young."

"Eighteen. She was only a kid when I first came to the island. They sent her to the missionary school here, and then her mother thought she ought to go to Auckland. But when Catherine fell ill they sent for her. It's funny what a year'll do for girls; when she went away she was a child who used to sit on my knee, and when she came back she was a young woman." He gave the doctor his small, diffident smile. "I'll tell you in confidence that we're engaged."

"Oh?"

"Not officially, so I'd sooner you didn't mention it. Old Swan's willing enough, but her father says she's too young. I suppose she is, but that's not his real reason for objecting. I'm afraid he doesn't think me good enough. He's got an idea that one of these days some rich English lord will come along in his yacht and fall madly in love with her. The nearest approach so far is young Fred in a pearling lugger."

He chuckled.

"I don't mind waiting. I know she's young. That's why I didn't ask her to marry me before. You see, it took me some time to get it into my head that she wasn't a little girl any more. When you love anyone like I love Louise, a few months, a year or two—well, they don't matter. We've got all life before us. It won't be quite the same when we're married. I know it's going to be perfect happiness, but we shall have it, we shan't be looking forward to it any more. We've got something now that we shall lose. D'you think that's stupid?"

"No."

"Of course, you've only just seen her, you don't know her. She's beautiful; isn't she?"

"Very."

"Well, her beauty's the least of her qualities. She's got a head on her shoulders, she's got the same practical spirit that her mother had. It makes me laugh sometimes to see this lovely child—after all, she is hardly more than a kid—manage the labour on the estate with so much commonsense. The Malays know it's useless to try any tricks with her. Of course, having lived practically all her life here, she has all sorts of knowledge in her bones. It's amazing how

shrewd she is. And the tact she shows with those two men, her grandfather and Frith. She knows them inside out; she knows all their faults, but she doesn't mind them; she's awfully fond of them, of course, and she takes them as they are, as though they were just like everybody else. I've never seen her even impatient with either of them. And, you know, one wants one's patience when old Swan rambles on with some story you've heard fifty times already."

"I guessed that it was she who made things run smooth."

"I suppose one would. But what one wouldn't guess is that her beauty, and her cleverness, and the goodness of her heart mask a spirit of the most subtle and exquisite delicacy. Mask isn't the right word. Mask suggests disguise and disguise suggests deceit. Louise doesn't know what disguise and deceit mean. She is beautiful, and she is kind, and she is clever; all that's she; but there's someone else there too, a sort of illusive spirit that somehow I think no one but her mother who is dead and I have ever suspected. I don't know how to explain it. It's like a wraith within the body; it's like a soul within the spirit, if you can imagine it; it's like the essential flame of the individual of which all the qualities that the world sees are only emanations."

The doctor raised his eyebrows. It seemed to him that Erik Christessen was getting a bit out of his depth. Still, he listened to him without displeasure. He was very much in love and Dr. Saunders had a half-cynical tenderness for young things in that condition.

"Have you ever read Hans Andersen's *Little Mermaid*?" asked Erik.

"A hundred years ago."

"That lovely flame-like spirit not my eyes but my soul has felt in Louise seems to me just like that little mermaid. It's not quite at home in the haunts of men. It has always a vague nostalgia for the sea. It's not quite human; she's so sweet, she's so gentle, she's so tender, and yet there is a sort of aloofness in her that keeps you at a distance. It seems to me very rare and beautiful. I'm not jealous of it. I'm not afraid of it. It's a priceless possession and I love her so much that I almost regret that she cannot always keep it. I feel that she will lose it when she becomes a wife and a mother, and whatever beauty of soul she has then it will be different. It's something apart and independent. It's the self which is part of the universal self; perhaps we've all got it; but what is so wonderful in

her is that it's almost sensible, and you feel that if only your eyes were a little more piercing you could see it plain. I'm so ashamed that I shall not go to her as pure as she will come to me."

"Don't be so silly," said the doctor.

"Why is it silly? When you love someone like Louise it's horrible to think that you've lain in strange arms and that you've kissed bought and painted mouths. I feel unworthy enough of her as it is. I might at least have brought her a clean and decent body."

"Oh, my dear boy!"

Dr. Saunders thought the young man was talking nonsense, but he felt no inclination to argue with him. It was getting late and his own concerns called him. He finished his drink.

"I have never had any sympathy with the ascetic attitude. The wise man combines the pleasures of the senses and the pleasures of the spirit in such a way as to increase the satisfaction he gets from both. The most valuable thing I have learnt from life is to regret nothing. Life is short, nature is hostile, and man is ridiculous; but oddly enough most misfortunes have their compensations and with a certain humour and a good deal of horse-sense one can make a fairly good job of what is after all a matter of very small consequence."

With that he got up and left.

CHAPTER XXIII

NEXT morning, comfortably seated on the veranda of the hotel, with his legs up, Dr. Saunders was reading a book. He had just learnt from the steamship office that news had been received of the arrival of a ship on the following day but one. It stopped at Bali, which would give him the opportunity of seeing that attractive island, and from there it would be easy to get to Surabaya. He was enjoying his holiday. He had forgotten that it was so pleasant to have nothing in the world to do.

"A man of leisure," he murmured to himself. "By God, I might almost pass for a gentleman."

Presently Fred Blake strolled along the road, nodded and joined him.

"You haven't received a cable, have you?" he asked.

"No, that's the last thing I expect."

"I was in the post-office a minute ago. The man asked me if my name was Saunders."

"That's funny. No one has the least notion I'm here; nor do I know anyone in the world who wants to communicate with me urgently enough to waste money on a cablegram."

But a surprise was in store for him. Barely an hour had passed when a youth rode up to the hotel on a bicycle and the manager shortly afterwards came out with him on to the veranda and asked Dr. Saunders to sign for a cable that had just arrived for him.

"What an extraordinary thing!" he cried. "Old Kim Ching is the only man who can even suspect that I'm here."

But when he opened the cablegram he was more astonished still.

"That's a damned idiotic thing," he said. "It's in code. Who in God's name can have done such a silly thing as that? How can I be expected to make head or tail of it?"

"May I have a look?" asked Fred. "If it's one of the well-known codes I might be able to tell you. One's sure to be able to get all the usual code-books here."

The doctor handed him the slip of paper. It was a numeral code. The words, or phrases, were represented by groups of numbers and the termination of each group was clearly indicated by a zero.

"The commercial codes use made-up words," said Fred.

"I know as much as that."

"I've made rather a study of codes. Been a hobby of mine. D'you mind if I have a shot at deciphering it?"

"Not a bit."

"They say it's only a question of time before you can find the secret of any code. There's one fellow in the British service, they say, who can solve the most complicated code anyone can invent in twenty-four hours."

"Go right ahead."

"I'll go inside. I must have pens and paper."

Dr. Saunders suddenly remembered. He reached out.

"Let me just see that cable again."

Fred handed it to him and he looked for the place of despatch. Melbourne. He did not give it back.

"Is it for you by any chance?"

Fred hesitated for an instant. Then he smiled. When he wanted to cajole anyone he could be very ingratiating.

"Well, it is, as a matter of fact."

"Why did you have it addressed to me?"

"Well, I thought that, me living on the *Fenton* and all that, perhaps they wouldn't deliver it, or they might want proof of identity or something. I thought it would save a lot of trouble if I had it sent to you."

"You've got your nerve with you."

"I knew you were a sport."

"And that little realistic detail about your being asked at the post-office if your name was Saunders?"

"Pure invention, old man," Fred answered airily.

Dr. Saunders chuckled.

"What would you have done if I hadn't been able to make head or tail of it and torn it up?"

"I knew it couldn't arrive till to-day. They only got the address yesterday."

"Who's 'they'?"

"The people who sent the cable," replied Fred, with a smile.

"Then it's not entirely for the pleasure of my society that you have been giving me your company this morning?"

"Not entirely."

The doctor gave him back the flimsy.

"You've got the cheek of the devil. Take it. I suppose you've got the key in your pocket."

"In my head."

He went into the hotel. Dr. Saunders began to read again. But he read with divided attention. He could not entirely dismiss from his head the incident that had just occurred. It amused him not a little and he wondered again what was the mystery in which the boy was involved. He was discreet. He had never so much as dropped a hint upon which an agile intelligence might work. There was nothing to go upon. The doctor shrugged his shoulders. After all, the matter was no business of his. He sought to dissipate his baffled curiosity by pretending to himself that he didn't care a damn and made a resolute effort to attend to what he was reading. But after an interval Fred came back on to the veranda.

"Have a drink, Doctor?" he said.

His eyes were shining, his face was flushed, but at the same time he bore an air of some bewilderment. He was excited. He wanted to burst out laughing, but since he could give no reason for hilarity plainly was trying to control himself.

"Had good news?" asked the doctor.

Suddenly Fred could restrain himself no longer. He burst into a peal of laughter.

"As good as all that?"

"I don't know if it's good or bad. It's awfully funny. I wish I could tell you. It's strange. It makes me feel rather queer. I don't quite know what to make of it. I must have a bit of time to get used to it. I don't quite know if I'm standing on my head or on my heels."

Dr. Saunders looked at him reflectively. The boy seemed to have gained vitality. There had always been something hang-dog in his expression that took away from his unusual good looks. Now he looked candid and open. You would have thought a load had been lifted from his shoulders. The drinks came.

"I want you to drink to the memory of a deceased friend of mine," he said, seizing his glass.

"By name?"

"Smith."

He emptied the glass in a draught.

"I must ask Erik if we can't go somewhere this afternoon. I feel like walking my legs off. A bit of exercise would do me good."

"When are you sailing?"

"Oh, I don't know. I like it here. I wouldn't mind staying for a bit. I wish you could have seen the view from the top of that volcano Erik and I went up yesterday. Pretty, I can tell you. The world's not a bad old place, is it?"

A buggy drawn by a small shabby horse came trundling shakily down the road, raising a cloud of dust, and stopped at the hotel. Louise was driving and her father sat by her side. He got out and walked up the steps. He had in his hand a flat brown-paper parcel.

"I forgot to give you the manuscripts last night that I promised to let you see, so I've brought them down."

"That's very kind of you."

Frith untied the string and disclosed a small pile of typewritten sheets.

"Of course, I want an absolutely candid opinion." He gave the doctor a doubtful look. "If you have nothing very much to do at the moment I might read you a few pages myself. I always think poetry should be read aloud and it's only the author who can do justice to it."

The doctor sighed. He was weak. He could think of no excuse that would turn Frith from his purpose.

"D'you think your daughter ought to wait in the sun?" he hazarded.

"Oh, she has things to do. She can go upon her errands and come back for me."

"Would you like me to go with her, sir?" said Fred Blake. "I've got nothing to do."

"I think she'd be very glad."

He went down and spoke to Louise. The doctor saw her look at him gravely, then smile a little and say something. She was wearing this morning a dress of white cotton and a large straw hat of native make. Under it her face had a golden coolness. Fred swung himself up beside her and she drove off.

"I'd like to read you the third canto," said Frith. "It has a lyrical quality that suits me. I think it's about the best thing I've done. Do you know Portuguese?"

"No, I don't."

"That's a pity. It's almost a word-for-word translation. It would have amused you to see how closely I've managed to reproduce the rhythm and music, the feeling, in fact, everything that makes it a great poem. Of course you won't hesitate to criticise, I'm only too willing to listen to anything you have to say, but I have no doubt in my own mind that this is the definitive translation. I can't honestly believe that it will ever be superseded."

He began to read. His voice had a pleasing quality. The poem was in *ottava rima*, and Frith laid an emphasis on the metre that was not ineffective. Dr. Saunders listened attentively. The version seemed fluent and easy, but he could not be sure how much this was due to the measured and stately elocution. Frith's delivery was dramatic, but he put the drama into the sound, rather than the sense, so that the meaning of what he read tended to escape you. He stressed the rhyme so that it reminded Dr. Saunders of a slow train jogging over an ill-laid rail and his body felt a slight jolt as the expected sound at regular intervals fell upon his ear. He found his attention wandering. The rich, monotonous voice hammered on and he began to feel a little drowsy. He stared hard at the reader, but his eyes closed involuntarily; he opened them with a slight effort and frowned with the violence of his concentration. He gave a start, for his head fell suddenly towards his chest, and he realised that for a moment he had dozed. Frith read of gallant

deeds and the great men that had made Portugal an empire. His voice rose when he read of high heroical things and trembled and fell when he read of death and untoward fate. Suddenly Dr. Saunders was conscious of silence. He opened his eyes. Frith was no longer there. Fred Blake was sitting in front of him, a roguish smile on his handsome face.

"Had a nice nap?"

"I haven't been asleep."

"You've been snoring your head off."

"Where's Frith?"

"He's gone. We came back in the buggy and they've gone home to dinner. He said I wasn't to disturb you."

"I know what's wrong with him now," said the doctor. "He had a dream and it's come true. What gives an ideal beauty is that it's unattainable. The gods laugh when men get what they want."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Fred. "You're half asleep still."

"Let's have a glass of beer. That at all events is real."

CHAPTER XXIV

ROUND about ten o'clock that night the doctor and Captain Nichols were playing piquet in the sitting-room of the hotel. They had been driven indoors by the flying ants which the lamp on the veranda attracted. Erik Christessen came in.

"Where have you been all day?" asked the doctor.

"I had to visit a plantation we've got over at the other end of the island. I thought I'd be back earlier, but the manager's just had a son and he was giving a feast. I had to stay for it."

"Fred was looking for you. He wanted to go for a walk."

"I wish I'd known. I'd have taken him with me." He threw himself into a chair and called for beer. "I've had the best part of ten miles to walk and then we had to row back half-way round the island."

"Like to play *chouette*?" asked the skipper, giving him his sharp, foxy look.

"No, I'm tired. Where's Fred?"

"Courtin', I expect."

"Not much chance of that here," said Erik, good-naturedly.

"Don't you be too sure. Good-lookin' young fellow, you know. The girls fall for 'im. At Merauke I 'ad a rare job keepin' 'em away from 'im. Between you and me and the gate-post I should 'ave said 'e clicked good and proper last night."

"Who with?"

"That girl up there."

"Louise?"

Erik smiled. The idea was quite preposterous to him.

"Well, I don't know. She come and 'ad a look at the boat with 'im this mornin'. And I know 'e dolled 'imself up somethin' fierce to-night. Shaved 'imself. Brushed 'is 'air. Put on a clean suit. I ask 'im what it was all about and 'e tell me to mind me own bloody business."

"Frith was down here this morning," said Dr. Saunders. "It may be he asked Fred to go and have supper there again to-night."

"He 'ad suppet on the Fenton," said Nichols.

He dealt the cards. The players went on with their game. Erik smoking a big Dutch cigar watched them and sipped his beer. Now and again the skipper gave him that sidelong glance of his in which there was something so unpleasant that it sent a shiver down your spine. His little close-set eyes glittered with malicious amusement. After a while Erik looked at his watch.

"I'll go down to the Fenton. Maybe Fred'd like to come fishing with me to-morrow morning."

"You won't find 'im," said the skipper.

"Why not? He wouldn't be at Swan's as late as this."

"Don't you be too sure."

"They go to bed at ten and it's past eleven now."

"Maybe 'e's gone to bed, too."

"Rot."

"Well, if you ask me I think that girl looked as though she knew a thing or two. It wouldn't surprise me if they was comfortably tucked up together at this very minute. And very nice too. I wish I was in 'is place."

Erik was standing up. With his great height he towered over the two men seated at the table. His face grew pale, and he clenched his fists. For a moment it looked as though he would hit the skipper. He gave an inarticulate cry of rage. The skipper looked up at him and grinned. Dr. Saunders could not but see that he was not in the least frightened. A blow from that great fist would certainly have knocked him out. He was a mean skunk, but he had

pluck. The doctor saw with what a tremendous effort Erik controlled himself.

"It's not a bad plan to judge others by oneself," he said, his voice trembling, "but not if one's a mangy cur."

"'Ave I said anythin' to offend you?" asked the skipper. "I didn't know the lady was a friend of yours."

Erik stared at him for a moment. His face showed the disgust he felt for the man, and his withering contempt. He turned on his heel and walked heavily out of the hotel.

"Wanting to commit suicide, Skipper?" asked the doctor dryly.

"Known a lot of them big fellows. Sentimental, that's what they are. Never 'it a chap smaller than yourself. Their minds don't work quick, you know. A bit stupid, generally."

The doctor chuckled. It diverted him to think of that rascal making shrewd use of the decent feelings of others to go his crooked, nasty way.

"You took a risk. If he hadn't had himself well in hand he might have hit you before he knew what he was doing."

"What was 'e upset about? Sweet on the girl 'imself?"

Dr. Saunders thought it unnecessary to tell him that Erik was engaged to Louise Frith.

"There are men who object to hearing their girl friends spoken of in that way," he answered.

"Come off it, Doc. Don't pull that stuff on me. It don't go with you at all. If a girl's easy a chap likes to know. If someone else 'as been there, well, there's a chance for 'im, ain't there? Hands to reason."

"You know, you're one of the dirtiest tykes I've ever met, Skipper," said the doctor in his detached manner.

"That's a compliment in its way, ain't it? Funny part is, you don't like me any the less if I am. Seems to me to prove you ain't exactly a saint yourself. And I don't mind tellin' you I've 'eard as much in various quarters."

Dr. Saunders's eyes twinkled.

"Digestion troubling you to-night, Skipper?"

"I ain't exactly comfortable, and it would be a lie if I said I was. I don't say I'm in pain, mind you, but I just ain't comfortable."

"It's a long business. You can't expect to be able to digest a pound of lead after a week's treatment."

"I don't want to digest a pound of lead, Doc, and I don't pretend for a minute I do. Mind you, I ain't complaining. I don't

say you ain't done me good. You 'ave. 'But I got a long way to go yet."

"Well, I've told you, have your teeth out. They're no use to you, and God knows, they don't add to your beauty."

"I will. I give you me word of honour. The minute I'm through with the cruise. I don't see why we can't pop over to Singapore. Sure to be a good American dentist there. The kid wants to go to Batavia now."

"Does he?"

"Yes, 'e got a cable this mornin'. I don't know what it was all about, but 'e's all for stoppin' on 'ere a bit and then goin' to Batavia."

"How d'you know he got a cable?"

"I found it in the pocket of 'is pants. He put on a clean suit to go ashore in, and 'e left his pants lyin' about. Untidy little blighter. That shows you 'e's not a sailor. A sailorman's always tidy. Has to be. It was all Greek to me. The cable, I mean. In cipher."

"I suppose you didn't notice that it was addressed to me?"

"You? No, I can't say I did."

"Well, have another look at it. I just gave it to Fred to decode."

The doctor found it highly diverting thus to throw Captain Nichols off the scent.

"Then what's the reason of all this changin' around? He was always for keepin' away from big places. Naturally, I thought it was on account of the cops. Anyhow, I mean to get to Singapore or sink the ruddy boat in the attempt." Captain Nichols leaned over impressively and looked with deep emotion into the doctor's eyes. "I wonder if you realise what it means to a chap not to 'ave 'ad a beefsteak and kidney puddin' for ten years. Talk of girls. You can 'ave all the girls in the world you like. There's not one I wouldn't give if I could only eat a suet puddin' with plenty of treacle and a good wallop of cream all over it. That's my idea of 'eaven and you can put your golden 'arps where the monkey put the nuts."

CHAPTER XXV

ERIK, with his deliberate stride that seemed to measure the earth as a man might measure a cricket pitch, walked down to the beach.

He was unmoved. He dismissed the skipper's shameless innuendo from his mind. It had left a nasty taste in his mouth and as though he had drunk a nauseous draught, he spat. But he was not devoid of humour and he gave a little low chuckle as he thought of the innuendo's absurdity. Fred was just a boy. He could not imagine that any woman would look at him twice; and he knew Louise much too well to suppose even for an instant that she could give him even a thought.

The beach was deserted. Everyone slept. He walked along the pier and hailed the *Fenton*. She was anchored a hundred yards out. Her light shone like a little steady eye on the smooth surface of the water. He shouted again. There was no answer. But a muffled, sleepy voice rose from below him. It was the blackfellow in the dinghy waiting for Captain Nichols. Erik went down the steps and found it tied to the bottom rung of the rail. The man was still half asleep. He yawned noisily as he stirred himself.

"Is that the *Fenton's* dinghy?"

"Ye'. What you want?"

The blackfellow thought it might be the skipper or Fred Blake, but seeing his mistake was irritable and suspicious.

"Just row me on board. I want to see Fred Blake."

"He ain't on board."

"Sure?"

"If he ain't swum."

"Oh, all right. Good-night."

The man gave a discontented grunt and settled down again to sleep. Erik walked back along the silent road. He thought that Fred had gone to the bungalow and Frith had kept him talking. He smiled as he wondered what the boy would make of the Englishman's mystical discourse. Something. He had taken to Fred. Beneath his pretence of worldly wisdom, and behind all that idle chatter about racing and cricketing, dancing and prize-fighting, you could not but be conscious of a pleasant and simple nature. Erik was not altogether unaware of the lad's feelings toward himself. Hero-worship. Oh, well, there was no great harm in that. It would pass. He was a decent kid. One might make something of him if one had the chance. It was nice to talk to him and feel that, even if it was all strange to him, he was trying to understand. It might be that if you cast a seed on that grateful soil a fair plant would spring up. Erik tramped on, hoping to meet Fred; they would walk back together, they might go on to his

house, and they could rout themselves out some cheese and biscuits and have a bottle of beer. He did not feel at all sleepy. He had not many people to talk to on the island; with Frith and old Swan he had mostly to listen. It was good to talk deep into the night.

"Had tired the sun with talking," he quoted to himself, "and sent him down the sky."

Erik was reticent about his private affairs, but he made up his mind to tell Fred of his engagement to Louise. He would like him to know. He had a great desire to talk about her that night. Sometimes love so possessed him that he felt if he did not tell somebody about it his heart would break. The doctor was old and could not understand; he could say things to Fred that it would have embarrassed him to say to a grown man.

It was three miles to the plantation, but his thoughts so absorbed him that he did not notice the distance. He was quite surprised when he arrived. It was funny that he had not met Fred. Then it occurred to him that Fred must have gone in to the hotel during the time he had gone down to the beach. How stupid of him not to think of that! Oh, well, there was nothing to be done about it. Now that he was there he might just as well go in and sit down for a bit. Of course, they'd all be asleep, but he wouldn't disturb anyone. He often did that; went up to the bungalow after they'd gone to bed and sat there thinking. There was a chair in the garden, below the veranda, in which old Swan sometimes rested in the cool of the evening. It was in front of Louise's room and it reposed him strangely to sit there quite quietly and look at her window and think of her sleeping so peacefully under her mosquito curtains. Her lovely ash-blonde hair was spread on the pillow and she lay on her side, her young breast rising and falling softly in deep slumber. The emotion that filled his heart when he thus pictured her was angel-pure. Sometimes he was a little sad when he thought that this virginal grace must perish and that slim and lovely body at last lie still in death. It was dreadful that a being so beautiful should die. He sat there sometimes till a faint chill in the balmy air, the rustle of the pigeons in the trees, warned him that day was at hand. They were hours of peace and of enchanting serenity. Once he had seen the shutter softly open, and Louise stepped out. Perhaps the heat oppressed her or a dream had awakened her and she wanted a breath of air. On her bare feet she walked across the veranda and with her hands on the rail stood

looking at the starry night. She wore a sarong round her loins, but the upper part of her body was naked. She raised her hands and shook out her pale hair over her shoulders. Her body was silhouetted in wan silver against the darkness of the house. She did not look a woman of flesh and blood. She was like a spirit-child, and Erik, his mind full of the old Danish stories, almost expected her to change into a lovely white bird and fly away to the fabled lands of the sunrise. He sat very still. He was hidden by the darkness. It was so silent that when she gave a little sigh he heard it as though he held her in his arms and her heart were pressed to his. She turned round and went back into her room. She drew the shutter to.

Erik walked up the earth road that led to the house and sat down in the chair that faced Louise's room. The house was dark. It was wrapped in a silence so profound that you might have thought its inmates were not asleep but dead. But there was no fear in the silence. It had an exquisite peace. It reassured you. It was comfortable, like the feel of a girl's smooth skin. Erik gave a little sigh of content. A sadness, but a sadness in which there was anguish no longer, befell him because dear Catherine Frith was there no more. He hoped that he would never forget the kindness she had shown him when, a shy and callow boy, he had first come to the island. He had worshipped her. She was then a woman of forty-five, but neither hard work nor child-bearing had had any effect on her powerful physique. She was tall and full-breasted, with magnificent golden hair, and she held herself proudly. You would have thought she would live to be a hundred. She took the place for him of the mother, a woman of character and of courage too, that he had left in a farmhouse in Denmark, and she loved in him the sons that had been born to her years before and of whom death had robbed her. But he felt that the relation between them was more intimate than it ever could have been if they had been mother and son. They could never have talked to one another so openly. Perhaps it could never have been such a tranquil satisfaction just to be in one another's company. He loved her and admired her and it made him very happy to be so sure that she loved him. Even then he had an inkling that the love he might one day feel for a girl would never have exactly the restful and comforting quality that he found in his very pure affection for Catherine Frith. She was a woman who had never read much, but she had a vast fund of knowledge, lying there like an unworked mine,

gathered, you would have said, through innumerable generations out of the timeless experience of the race, so that she could cope with your book-learning and meet you on level terms. She was one of those persons who made you feel as though you were saying wonderful things, and when you talked to her, thoughts came to you that you had never dreamt you were capable of. She was of a practical turn and she had a canny sense of humour; she was quick to ridicule absurdity, but the kindness of her heart was such that if she laughed at you, it was so tenderly that you loved her for it. It seemed to Erik that her most wonderful trait was a sincerity so perfect that it glowed all about her with a light that shone into the heart of all that had communication with her.

It filled Erik with a warm and grateful feeling to think that her life for so long had been as happy as she deserved it to be. Her marriage with George Frith had been an idyll. She had been a widow for some time when he first came to that distant and beautiful island. Her first husband was a New Zealander, skipper of a schooner engaged in the island trade, and he was drowned at sea in the great hurricane that ruined her father. Swan, owing to the wound in his chest unable to do any hard work, was broken by the accident that swept away almost all his life's savings, and together they came to that plantation which with his shrewd Scandinavian sense he had kept for years as a refuge should all else fail. She had had a son by the New Zealander, but he had died of diphtheria when still a baby. She had never known anyone like George Frith. She had never heard anyone talk as he did. He was thirty-six, with an untidy mop of dark hair and a haggard, romantic look. She loved him. It was as though her practical sense, her nobly terrestrial instincts, sought their compensation in this mysterious waif who spoke so greatly of such high things. She loved him not as she had loved her rough, downright sailor husband, but with a half-amused tenderness that wanted to protect and guard. She felt that he was infinitely above her. She stood in awe of his subtle and aspiring intelligence. She never ceased to believe in his goodness and his genius. Erik thought that, notwithstanding Frith's tiresomeness, he would always feel kindly toward him because she had so devotedly loved him and he for so many years had given her happiness.

It was Catherine who had first said that she would like him to marry Louise. She was then a child.

"She'll never be as lovely as you, my dear," he smiled.

"Oh, much more. You can't tell yet. I can. She'll be like me, but quite different, and she'll be better-looking than I ever was."

"I would only marry her if she was exactly like you. I don't want her different."

"Wait till she's grown-up and then you'll be very pleased she isn't a fat old woman."

It amused him now to think of that conversation. The darkness of the house was paling and for a moment he thought with a start that it must be the dawn that was breaking, but then, looking round, he saw that a lop-sided moon was floating up over the tops of the trees, like an empty barrel drifting with the tide, and its light, dim still, shone on the sleeping bungalow. He gave the moon a friendly little wave of the hand.

When that strong, muscular and vigorous woman was inexplicably attacked by a disease of the heart, and violent spasms of agonising pain warned her that death at any moment might overtake her, she spoke to Erik again of her wish. Louise, at school in Auckland, had been sent for, but she could only get home by a roundabout route, and it would take her a month to arrive.

"She'll be seventeen in a few days. I think she's got a head on her shoulders, but she'll be very young to take full charge of everything here."

"What makes you think she'll want to marry me?" asked Erik.

"She adored you when she was a child. She used to follow you about like a dog."

"Oh, that's just a school-girl's *Schwärmerei*."

"You'll be practically the only man she's ever known."

"But, Catherine, you wouldn't wish me to marry her if I didn't love her."

She gave him her sweet, humorous smile.

"No, but I can't help thinking that you will love her." She was silent for a moment. Then she said something that he did not quite understand. "I think I'm just as glad that I shan't be here."

"Oh, don't say that. Why?"

She did not answer. She just patted his hand and chuckled.

It touched him with a sort of sad emotion to reflect how right she had been and he was inclined to attribute her prescience to the strange presentiment of the dying. He was staggered when he saw Louise on her return. She was grown into a lovely girl. She had lost her childish worship of him, but also her shyness; she was

perfectly at ease with him. She was, of course, very fond of him; he couldn't doubt that, she was so sweet, friendly and affectionate; but he had the impression, not exactly that she criticised him, but that she coolly appraised him. It did not embarrass him, but it made him feel a little self-conscious. She had acquired the quizzical, humorous look in the eyes that he knew so well in her mother, but whereas in her it warmed your heart because it was so rich with love, with Louise it slightly disconcerted you; you were not sure that she did not find you a trifle absurd. Erik discovered that he had to start with her from the beginning, for it was not only her body that had changed, it was her spirit too. She was as companionable as ever, as jolly, and they took the same long walks together as in the old days, bathed and fished; they talked and laughed together as freely as when he was twenty-two and she fourteen; but he was vaguely conscious that there was in her a new aloofness. Her soul had been transparent as glass; now it was mysteriously veiled, and he was aware that its depths held something he did not know.

Catherine died quite suddenly. She had an attack of angina, and when the half-caste doctor reached the bungalow she was beyond his aid. Louise broke down completely. The years, with the early maturity they had brought, fell away from her and she was a little girl again. She did not know how to cope with her grief. She was shattered. For long hours she lay in Erik's arms on his lap, weeping, like a child who cannot realise that sorrow will pass, and would not be comforted. The situation was more than she could deal with, and she did meekly what he told her. Frith went all to pieces and no sense could be got from him. He spent his time drinking whisky and water and crying. Old Swan talked of all the children he had had and how they had died one after the other. They'd all treated him very badly. There was not one of them left now to look after a poor old man. Some of them had run away and some had robbed him, and some had married he didn't know whom, and the rest had died. One would have thought one of them would have had the decency to stay and look after his father now he wanted looking after.

Erik did everything that had to be done.

"You are angelic," Louise said to him.

He saw the light of love in her eyes, but he contented himself with patting her hand and telling her not to be silly; he did not want to take advantage of her emotion, of the sense of helplessness

and of being deserted that just then overwhelmed her, to ask her to marry him. She was so young. It would be unfair to take this advantage over her. He loved her madly. But no sooner had he said that to himself than he corrected it; he loved her sanely. He loved her with all the energy of his solid intelligence, with all the power of his mighty limbs, with all the vigour of his honest character; he loved her not only for the beauty of her virginal body, but for the firm outlines of her growing personality and for the purity of her virginal soul. His love increased his sense of his own strength. He felt there was nothing he could not achieve. And yet, when he considered her perfection, so much more than the healthy mind in the healthy body, the subtle, sensitive soul that so wonderfully corresponded with the lovely form, he felt respect and humble.

And now it was all settled. Frith's hesitations were not serious; he could be induced, if not to listen to reason, at least to yield to persuasion. But Swan was very old. He was failing fast. It might be necessary to await his death before they married. Erik was efficient. The company would not leave him indefinitely on that island. Sooner or later they would move him to Rangoon, Bangkok or Calcutta. Eventually they would need him at Copenhagen. He could never be satisfied, like Frith, to spend his life on the plantation and make a bare living by selling cloves and nutmegs. Nor had Louise the placidity that had enabled her mother to make a lovely idyll of her life on that beautiful island. There was nothing he had admired in Catherine so much as that out of these simple elements, the common round of every day, the immemorial labours of husbandry, peace, quiet, humour and a contented mind, she had been able to make a pattern of such an exquisite and completed beauty. Louise was high-strung as her mother had never been. Though she accepted her circumstances with serenity, her vagrant spirit roved. Sometimes, when they sat on the ramparts of the old Portuguese fort and looked at the sea together, he felt that there was an activity in her soul that craved exercise.

They had often spoken of their wedding journey. He wanted to arrive in Denmark in the spring when all the trees after the long cruel winter were bursting into leaf. The green of that northern country had a fresh tenderness that the tropics never knew. The meadows with their black-and-white cows and the farmsteads nestling among trees had a sweet and tidy beauty that did not

amaze you, but made you feel at home. Then there was Copenhagen, with its wide, busy streets, the prim, dignified houses with so many windows you were quite surprised, and its churches and the red palaces King Christian had built that looked as though they belonged to a fairy story. He wanted to take her to Elsinore. It was on its battlements that his father's ghost had appeared to the Danish prince. It was grand on the Sound in summer, the calm sea grey or milk-blue; life there was very pleasant, then, with music and laughter; and all through the long northern twilight the cheerful talk flowed. But they must go to England. There was London, with the National Gallery and the British Museum. Neither of them had ever been to England. They would go to Stratford-on-Avon and see Shakespeare's tomb. Paris, of course. It was the centre of civilisation. She would go shopping at the Louvre, and they would drive in the Bois de Boulogne. They would walk hand in hand in the Forest of Fontainebleau. Italy and the Grand Canal by moonlight in a gondola! For Frith's sake they must go to Lisbon. It would be wonderful to see the country from which those old Portuguese had sallied to found an empire of which, beside a few ruined forts and here and there a moribund station, nothing remained but a little deathless poetry and an imperishable renown. To see all these lovely places with the person who is all the world to you, what could life offer more perfect? At that moment Erik understood what Frith meant when he said that the Primal Spirit, whom you can call God if you will, was not apart from the world but in it. That great spirit was in the stone on the mountain side, in the beast of the field, in man and in the thunder that rolled down the vault of heaven.

The late moon now flooded the house with white light. It gave its neat lines an airy distinction and its substantial mass a fragile and charming unreality. Suddenly the shutter of Louise's room was slowly pushed open. Erik held his breath. If he had been asked what he wanted most in the world, he would have said just for one moment to be allowed to see her. She came out on the veranda. She was wearing nothing but the sarong in which she slept.

In the moonlight she looked like a wraith. The night seemed on a sudden to stand still and the silence was like a living thing that listened. She took a step or two and looked up and down the veranda. She wanted to see that no one was about. Erik expected her to come to the rail as she had done before and stand there for a

while. In that light he thought he could almost see the colour of her eyes. She turned round towards the window of her room and beckoned. A man came out. He stopped for an instant as though to take her hand, but she shook her head and pointed to the rail. He went up to it and quickly stepped over. He looked down at the ground, six feet below him, and leapt lightly down. Louise slipped back into her room and closed the shutter behind her.

For a moment Erik was so astonished, so bewildered, that he could not understand. He did not believe his eyes. He sat where he was, in old Swan's chair, stock-still, and stared and stared. The man landed on his feet and then sat down on the ground. He appeared to be putting on his shoes. Suddenly Erik found the use of his limbs. He sprang forwards, the man was only a few yards away, and with a bound seized him by the collar of his coat and dragged him to his feet. The man, startled, opened his mouth to cry out, but Erik put his great heavy hand over it. Then he slowly dropped his hand till it encircled the man's throat. The man was so taken aback that he did not struggle. He stood there stupidly, staring at Erik, powerless in that mighty grasp. Then Erik looked at him. It was Fred Blake.

CHAPTER XXVI

AN hour later Dr. Saunders, lying awake in bed, heard steps in the passage and then a scratching on the door. He did not answer and the handle was tried. The door was locked.

"Who is it?" he called out.

The reply came on the top of his cry, quickly, in a low, agitated voice.

"Doctor. It's me, Fred. I want to see you."

The doctor had smoked half a dozen pipes after Captain Nichols had left him to go back on board the *Fenton*, and when he had been smoking he hated to be disturbed. Thoughts as clear as the geometrical designs in a child's drawing-book, squares, oblongs, circles, triangles, flowed through his mind in an orderly procession. The delight he felt in their lucidity was part and parcel of the indolent pleasure of his body. He raised his mosquito curtains and padded across the bare floor to the door. When he opened it he saw the night watchman, hooded with a blanket

against the noxious air of the night, holding a lantern, and just behind him Fred Blake.

"Let me in, Doctor. It's frightfully important."

"Wait till I light the lamp."

By the light of the watchman's lantern he found the matches and lit the lamp. Ah Kay, who slept on a mat on the veranda outside the doctor's room, awoke at the disturbance and raising himself on his seat rubbed his dark sloe-like eyes. Fred gave the watchman a tip and he went away.

"Go to sleep, Ah Kay," said the doctor. "There's nothing for you to get up for."

"Look here, you must come to Erik's at once," said Fred. "There's been an accident."

"What d'you mean?"

He looked at Fred and saw that he was as white as a sheet. He was trembling in every limb.

"He's shot himself."

"Good God! How d'you know?"

"I've just come from there. He's dead."

At Fred's first words the doctor had instinctively begun to busy himself, but at this he stopped short.

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, quite."

"If he's dead, what's the good of my going?"

"He can't be left like that. Come and see. Oh, my God." His voice broke as though he were going to cry. "Perhaps you can do something."

"Who's there?"

"Nobody. He's lying there alone. I can't bear it. You must do something. For Christ's sake come."

"What's that on your hand?"

Fred looked at it. It was smeared with blood. By a natural instinct he was about to wipe it on his duck trousers.

"Don't do that," cried the doctor, catching hold of his wrist. "Come and wash it off."

Still holding him by the wrist, with the lamp in his other hand, he led him into the bath-house. This was a little dark, square chamber with a concrete floor; there was a huge tub in the corner and you bathed yourself by sluicing water over your body with a small tin pan which you filled from the tub. The doctor gave a pan full of water and a piece of soap to Fred and told him to wash.

"Have you got any on your clothes?"

He held up the lamp to look.

"I don't think so."

The doctor poured the blood-stained water away and they went back to the bedroom. The sight of the blood had startled Fred and he sought to master his hysterical agitation. He was whiter than ever and though he held his hands clenched, Dr. Saunders saw that he could not control their violent trembling.

"Better have a drink. Ah Kay, give the gentleman some whisky. No water."

Ah Kay got up and brought a glass into which he poured the neat spirit. Fred tossed it off. The doctor watched him closely.

"Look here, my boy, we're in a foreign country. We don't want to run up against the Dutch authorities. I don't believe they're very easy people to deal with."

"We can't leave him lying there in a pool of blood."

"Isn't it a fact that something happened in Sydney that made you leave in a hurry? The police here are going to ask you a lot of questions. D'you want them to cable to Sydney?"

"I don't care. I'm fed up with the whole thing."

"Don't be a fool. If he's dead you can do no good and neither can I. We'd better keep out of it. The best thing you can do is to get away from the island as soon as you can. Did anyone see you there?"

"Where?"

"At his house," said the doctor impatiently.

"No, I was only there a minute. I rushed straight round here."

"What about his boys?"

"I suppose they were asleep. They live at the back."

"I know. The night watchman's the only person who's seen you. Why did you rouse him?"

"I couldn't get in. The door was locked. I had to get hold of you."

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. There are plenty of reasons why you should rouse me out in the middle of the night. What made you go to Erik's?"

"I had to. I had something to say to him that couldn't wait."

"I suppose he did shoot himself. You didn't shoot him, did you?"

"Me?" The boy gasped with horror and surprise. "Why, he's . . . I wouldn't have hurt a hair of his head. If he'd been my

brother I couldn't have thought more of him. The best pal a chap ever had."

The doctor frowned with faint distaste of the language Fred used, but his feeling for Erik was very clear, and the shock the doctor's question caused him was plain enough proof that he spoke the truth.

"Then what does it all mean?"

"Oh, my God, I don't know. He must have gone crazy. How the hell should I know he was going to do a thing like that?"

"Spit it out, sonny. You needn't be afraid I shall give you away."

"It's that girl up at old Swan's. Louise."

The doctor sharpened his look, but did not interrupt him.

"I had a bit of fun with her to-night."

"You? But you only saw her for the first time yesterday."

"I know. What's that got to do with it? She took a fancy to me the first moment she saw me. I knew that. I took a fancy to her, too. I haven't had a thing since I left Sydney. Somehow, I can't stick these natives. When I had that dance with her I knew it was all right. I could have had her then. We went out in the garden when you were playing bridge. I kissed her. She was just aching for it. When a girl's like that you don't want to give her time to think twice about it. I was in a bit of a state myself. I've never seen anyone to touch her. If she'd told me to go and throw myself over a cliff I'd have done it. When she came this morning with her old man I asked her if we couldn't meet. She said, No. I said, Couldn't I come up after they'd all gone to bed and we could have a bathe in the pool together? She said, No, but she wouldn't say why not. I told her I was crazy about her. And I was too. My God, she's a peach. I took her down to the ketch and showed her over. I kissed her there. That damned old Nichols wouldn't leave us alone for more than a minute. I said I'd go up to the plantation to-night. She said she wouldn't come, but I knew she would, she wanted me just as much as I wanted her; and sure enough when I got there, she was waiting for me. It was lovely there, in the dark, except for the mosquitoes; they were biting like mad, it was more than flesh and blood could stand, and I said, Couldn't we go to her room? and she said she was afraid, but I told her it was all right, and at last she said, Yes."

Fred stopped. The doctor looked at him from under his heavy eyelids. His pupils, from the opium he had smoked,

were like pin-points. He listened and pondered over what he heard.

"At last she said I'd better get a move on. I put on my clothes, all but my shoes, so that I shouldn't make a row on the veranda. She went out first to see the coast was clear. Sometimes when he couldn't sleep old Swan wandered up and down there as if it was the deck of a ship. Then I slipped out and hopped over the veranda. I sat down on the ground and started to put on my shoes and before I knew what had happened someone grabbed me and pulled me up. Erik. He's got the strength of an ox, he lifted me up as if I was a bit of a kid, and he put his hand over my mouth, but I was so startled I couldn't have shouted if I'd wanted to. Then he put his hand round my throat and I thought he was going to choke the life out of me. I don't know, I was paralysed, I couldn't even struggle. I couldn't see his face. I heard him breathing; by God, I thought I was done for, and then suddenly he let me go; he gave me a great clout over the side of the head, with the back of his hand, I think it was, and I just fell like a log. He stood over me for a bit; I didn't move; I thought if I moved he'd kill me, and then suddenly he turned round and walked away at about a hundred miles an hour. I got up in a minute and looked at the house. Louise hadn't heard a thing. I thought, should I go and tell her? but I didn't dare, I was afraid someone would hear me knocking on the shutter. I didn't want to frighten her. I didn't know what to do. I started to walk, and then I found I hadn't put my shoes on, I had to go back for them. I was in a panic because just at first I couldn't find them. I drew a long breath when I got back on the road. I was wondering if Erik was waiting for me. It's no joke walking along a road at night, with not a soul about, and knowing that a great hulking fellow may step out at any minute and give you a hiding. He could wring my neck like a chicken's, and I shouldn't be able to do a thing about it. I didn't walk very quick and I kept my eyes peeled. I thought if I saw him first I'd make a dash for it. I mean, it's no good standing up to a chap when you haven't got a chance, and I knew I could run a lot faster than him. I expect it was only nerves. After I'd walked about a mile I wasn't in a funk any more. And then, you know, I felt I must see him at any price. If it had been anybody else I shouldn't have cared a damn, but, somehow, I couldn't stand him thinking me just a damned swine. You can't understand, but I've never met anyone like him, he's so straight himself, you can't bear he

shouldn't think you straight, too. Most people you know—well, they're no better than you are; but Erik was different. I mean, you'd have to be a perfect damned fool not to see that he was one in a thousand. See what I mean?"

The doctor gave his thin, derisive smile, and his lips were drawn back from his long yellow teeth so that you thought of the snarl of a gorilla.

"Goodness. I know, it's shattering. One doesn't know what to do about it. It knocks human relations endways. Damned shame, isn't it?"

"Christ, why can't you talk like everybody else?"

"Go on."

"Well, I just felt I had to have it out with him. I wanted to tell him the whole thing. I was quite ready to marry the girl. I just couldn't help myself with her, I mean. After all, it was only human nature. You're old, you don't know what it is. It's all very well when you're fifty. I knew I shouldn't have a moment's rest till I put myself right with him. When I got to his house I stood outside for I don't know how long, screwing up my courage; it wanted some nerve to go in, you know, but I just forced myself. I couldn't help thinking that if he hadn't killed me then he wouldn't kill me now. I knew he didn't lock the door. That first time we went there he just turned the handle and walked in. But, my God, my heart was thumping when I got in the passage. It was pitch-black when I shut the door. I called his name, but he didn't answer. I knew where his room was and I went along and I knocked at the door. Somehow, I didn't believe he was asleep. I knocked again and then I shouted, 'Erik, Erik.' At least I tried to shout, but my throat was so dry my voice was as hoarse as a raven's. I couldn't make out why he didn't answer. I thought he was just waiting in there, listening. I was in a blue funk, I had half a mind to cut and run, but I didn't. I tried the latch, the door wasn't locked, and I opened it. I couldn't see a thing, I called again and I said: 'For God's sake speak to me, Erik.' Then I struck a match and I gave a great jump. I almost jumped out of my skin, he was lying on the floor, at my feet, and if I'd taken a step more I should have tumbled over him. I dropped the match and I couldn't see a thing. I screamed at him. I thought he'd fainted or was dead drunk or something. I tried to strike another match, but the damned thing wouldn't light, and then, when it did, I held it over him and, my God, the whole side of his head was shot away.

The match went out and I lit another. I saw the lamp and I lit that. I knelt down and felt his hand. It was quite warm. He had a revolver clenched in the other hand. I touched his face to see if he was alive. There was blood all over the place. My God, you never saw such a wound; and then I just came round here as quick as I could. I shall never forget that sight as long as I live."

He hid his face with his hands and in his misery rocked to and fro. Then a sob broke from him and, throwing himself back in the chair, he turned his face away and wept. Dr. Saunders let him cry. He reached out for a cigarette, lit it and deeply inhaled the smoke.

"Did you leave the lamp burning?" he said at last.

"Oh, damn the lamp!" cried Fred impatiently. "Don't be such a bloody fool."

"It doesn't matter. He could just as well have shot himself with the lamp burning as in the darkness. Funny none of the boys should have heard anything. I suppose they would have thought it was a Chinaman letting off a cracker."

Fred put aside all that the doctor said. Nothing of that was of any consequence.

"What in God's name made him do it?" he cried desperately.

"He was engaged to Louise."

The effect of the doctor's remark was startling. Fred sprang to his feet with a bound, and his face grew livid. His eyes almost started out of his head with horror.

"Erik? He never told me."

"I suppose he thought it was none of your damned business."

"She didn't tell me. She never said a word. Oh, God! If I'd known I wouldn't have touched her with the fag-end of a barge-pole. You're just saying that. It can't be true. It can't!"

"He told me so himself."

"Was he awfully in love with her?"

"Awfully."

"Then why didn't he kill me or her instead of himself?"

Dr. Saunders gave a laugh.

"Curious, isn't it?"

"For God's sake don't laugh. I'm so miserable. I thought nothing worse could happen to me than what has. But this. . . . She meant nothing to me, really. If I'd only known I wouldn't have thought of fooling about with her. He was the best pal a chap ever had. I wouldn't have hurt him for anything in the world.

What a beast he must have thought me! He'd been so awfully decent to me."

Tears filled his eyes and flowed slowly down his cheeks. He cried bitterly.

"Isn't life foul? You start a thing and you don't think twice about it, and then there's hell to pay. I think there's a curse on me."

He looked at the doctor, his mouth trembling and his fine eyes heavy with woe. Dr. Saunders examined his own feelings. He did not quite approve of the faint satisfaction he felt in the young man's grief. He had a tendency to feel that what he was suffering served him right. At the same time he was unreasonably sorry to see him unhappy. He looked so young and woebegone he could not help being touched.

"You'll get over it, you know," he said. "There's nothing one doesn't get over."

"I wish I was dead. My old man said I was no damned good and I bet he was right. I make trouble wherever I go. I swear it's not all my fault. The lousy bitch. Why didn't she leave me alone? Can you imagine that a girl who was engaged to a chap like Erik should go to bed with the first man she sees. Well, there's one thing, he was well rid of her."

"You're talking rubbish."

"I may be a stinking bad lot, but, by God, I'm not as bad as she is. I thought I was going to get another chance and now it's all gone to hell."

He hesitated a moment.

"You remember that cable I got this morning? It told me something I didn't know. It was so extraordinary, I couldn't make it out at first. There's a letter for me at Batavia. It's all right for me to go there now. It was rather a shock at first. I didn't know whether to laugh or what. The cable says I died of scarlet fever at the Fever Hospital just outside Sydney. I saw what it meant after a bit. Father's rather important in New South Wales. There was a bad epidemic. They rushed someone to the hospital under my name; they had to explain why I didn't go to the office and all that, and when the chap died I died too. If I know my old man he was damned glad to get rid of me. Well, there's someone who'll lie nice and cosy in the family grave. Father's a wonderful organiser. It's him that's kept the party in power so long. He wasn't going to take a risk if he could help it, and I expect as long as I was above ground he never could feel quite safe. The Government got in

again at the election. Did you see that? A thumping majority. I can see him with a black band round his arm."

He gave a mirthless chuckle. Dr. Saunders shot a question at him, abruptly.

"What did you do?"

Fred looked away. He answered in a low, choked voice.

"I killed a chap."

"I wouldn't tell too many people if I were you," said the doctor.

"You seem to take it pretty calm. Have you ever killed anyone?"

"Only professionally."

Fred looked up quickly and a smile was wrung from his tortured lips.

"You're a queer fellow, Doc. Blest if I can make you out. When one's talking to you, somehow nothing seems to matter a damn. Isn't there anything that makes a difference to you? Isn't there anything you believe in?"

"Why did you kill him? For fun?"

"A damned lot of fun I got out of it. What I've gone through! I wonder it hasn't turned my hair grey. You see, I brooded over it. I could never forget it. I'd be feeling all merry and bright and having a good time and then suddenly I'd remember. I was afraid to go to sleep sometimes. I used to dream I was being pinioned and just going to be hanged. Half a dozen times I've been on the point of slipping overboard one night when nobody was looking, and just swimming till I drowned or a shark got me. If you only knew what a relief it was when I got that cable and understood what it meant! My God, it was a weight off my mind. I was safe. You know, I never felt really safe on the lugger and when we landed anywhere I was always looking for someone to nab me. The first time I saw you, I thought you were a detective and you were on my track. D'you know the first thing I thought this morning? 'Now I shall be able to sleep sound.' And then this had got to happen. I tell you there's a curse on me."

"Don't talk such rot."

"What am I to do? Where am I to go? To-night, while that girl and I were lying in one another's arms, I thought: Why shouldn't I marry her and settle down here? The boat'll be damned useful. Nichols could have gone back on the same ship that you're taking. You could have got my letter that's waiting in Batavia. I expect it's got a bit of money in it. Mother would have

made the old man send something. I thought me and Erik, we could have gone into partnership."

"You can't do that, but you can still marry Louise."

"Me?" cried Fred. "After what's happened? I couldn't stick the sight of her. I hope to God I never see her again. I'll never forgive her. Never. Never."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"God knows. I don't. I can't go home. I'm dead and buried in the family grave. I should like to see Sydney again, George Street, you know, and Manley Bay. I haven't got anyone in the world now. I'm a pretty good accountant, I suppose. I can get a job as book-keeper in some store. I don't know where to go. I'm like a lost dog."

"If I were you the first thing I'd do is to go back to the *Fenton* and try and get a little sleep. You're all in. You'll be able to think better in the morning."

"I can't go back to the boat. I hate it. If you knew how often I've woken up in a cold sweat, with my heart beating, because those men opened the door of my cell, and I knew the rope was waiting for me! And now Erik's lying there with half his head blown away. My God, how can I sleep?"

"Well, curl up on that chair. I'm going to bed."

"Thanks. Go ahead. Will it disturb you if I smoke?"

"I'll give you a little something. There's no object in your lying awake."

The doctor got out his hypodermic needle and gave the boy a shot of morphine. Then he put out the lamp and slipped under his mosquito curtain.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE doctor awoke when Ah Kay brought him a cup of tea. Ah Kay drew back the mosquito curtains and raised the jalousie to let in the day. The doctor's room looked on the garden, tangled and neglected, with its palm trees, its clumps of bananas—their immense flat leaves still shining with the night, its bedraggled but splendid cassias; and the light filtered through, cool and green. The doctor smoked a cigarette. Fred lay on the long chair, sleeping still, and his unlined boyish face, so calm, had an innocence in

which the doctor, with a suspicion of sardonic humour, found a certain beauty.

"Shall I wake him?" asked Ah Kay.

"Not yet."

While he slept he was at peace. He must awake to grief. An odd boy. Who would have thought that he could be so susceptible to goodness? For, though he didn't know it, though he put what he felt in clumsy and stupid words, there was no doubt about it, what had knocked him off his feet in the Dane, what had excited his embarrassed admiration and made him feel that here was a man of a different sort, was the plain, simple goodness that shone in him with so clear and steadfast a light. You might have thought Erik a trifle absurd, you might have asked yourself uneasily whether his head were quite equal to his heart, but there was no doubt about it, he had, heaven only knew by what accident of nature, a real and simple goodness. It was specific. It was absolute. It had an æsthetic quality, and that commonplace lad, insensible to beauty in its usual forms, had been moved to ecstasy by it as a mystic might be moved by the sudden overwhelming sense of union with the Godhead. It was a queer trait that Erik had possessed.

"It leads to no good," said the doctor, with a grim smile as he got out of bed.

He went over to the mirror and stared at himself. He looked at his grey hair all disarranged after the night and his stubble of white beard that had grown since he had shaved the day before. He bared his teeth to look at his long yellow fangs. There were heavy pouches under his eyes. His cheeks had an unsightly purple. He was seized with disgust. He wondered why it was that of all creatures man was the only one that age so hideously disfigured. It was pitiful to think that Ah Kay, with his slender ivory beauty, must become nothing but a little shrivelled, wizened Chinaman, and that Fred Blake, so slim, upright and square-shouldered, would be just a red-faced old man with a bald head and a belly. The doctor shaved and had his bath. Then he awakened Fred.

"Come along, young fellow. Ah Kay's just gone to see about our breakfast."

Fred opened his eyes, immediately alert, eager in his youth to welcome another day, but then, looking about him, he remembered where he was, and everything else. His face on a sudden grew sullen.

"Oh, buck up," said the doctor impatiently. "Go and have a wash down."

Ten minutes later they were seated at breakfast, and the doctor noticed without surprise that Fred ate with a hearty appetite. He did not talk. Dr. Saunders congratulated himself. After so disturbed a night he felt none too well. His reflections upon life, then, were acid, and he preferred to keep them to himself.

When they were finishing the manager came up to them and addressed himself to Dr. Saunders in voluble Dutch. He knew the doctor did not understand, but talked nevertheless, and his signs and gestures would have made him comprehensible even if his manner, agitated and distressed, had not made what he was saying quite clear. Dr. Saunders shrugged his shoulders. He pretended he had no notion what the half-caste was talking about, and presently, in exasperation, the little man left them.

"They've found out," said the doctor.

"How?"

"I don't know. I suppose his house-boy went in to take him his tea."

"Isn't there anybody who can interpret?"

"We shall hear soon enough. Don't forget, we neither of us know anything about it."

They relapsed into silence. A few minutes later the manager returned with a Dutch official, in a white uniform with brass buttons; he clicked his heels together and mentioned an incomprehensible name. He spoke English with a very strong accent.

"I'm sorry to tell you that a Danish trader called Christessen has shot himself."

"Christessen?" cried the doctor. "That tall fellow?"

He watched Fred out of the corner of his eye.

"He was found by his boys an hour ago. I am in charge of the inquiry. There can be no doubt that it is a case of suicide. Mr. van Ryk," he motioned to the half-caste manager, "informs me that he was here last night to visit you."

"That's quite true."

"How long did he stay?"

"Ten minutes or a quarter of an hour."

"Was he sober?"

"Quite."

"I never saw him drunk myself. Did he say anything that suggested he had the intention of doing away with himself?"

"No. He was quite cheerful. I didn't know him very well, you know. I only arrived three days ago, and I'm waiting for the Princess Juliana."

"Yes, I know. Then you can give no explanation of the tragedy?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That is all I wanted to know. If I have any need of anything more from you I will let you know. Perhaps you will not mind coming to my office." He glanced at Fred. "And this gentleman can tell us nothing?"

"Nothing," said the doctor. "He was not here. I was playing cards with the skipper of the ketch in the harbour just now."

"I've seen her. I'm sorry for the poor fellow. He was very quiet and never gave any trouble. You could not help liking him. I'm afraid it's the old story. It's a mistake to live alone in a place like this. They brood. They get home-sick. The heat is killing. And then one day they can't stand it any more, and they just put a bullet through their heads. I've seen it before, more than once. Much better to have a little girl to live with you, and it makes hardly any difference to your expenses. Well, gentlemen, I am much obliged to you. I won't take up any more of your time. You have not been to the *Gesellschaft* yet, I believe? We shall be very glad to see you there. You will find all the most important people of the island there from six or seven till nine. It is a jolly place. Quite a social centre. Well, good-morning, gentlemen."

He clicked his heels, shook hands with the doctor and Fred, and stumped somewhat heavily away.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN that hot country not much time was permitted to pass between a person's death and his burial, but in this case the examination had to be conducted, and it was not till latish in the afternoon that the funeral took place. It was attended by a few Dutch friends of Erik, Frith and Dr. Saunders, Fred Blake and Captain Nichols. This was an occasion after the skipper's heart. He had managed to borrow a black suit from an acquaintance he had made on the island. It did not fit very well, since it belonged to a man both taller and stouter than he, and he was obliged to turn up the

trousers and the sleeves, but in contrast with the others, clad in nondescript fashion, it produced a satisfactory effect of respectability. The service was conducted in Dutch, which seemed to Captain Nichols a little out of place, and he could not take part in it, but there was much unction in his deportment; and when it was over he shook hands with the Lutheran pastor and the two or three Dutch officials present as though they had rendered him a personal service, so that they thought for a moment he must be a near relative of the deceased. Fred wept.

The four Britishers walked back together. They came to the harbour.

"If you gentlemen will come on board the *Fenton*," said the skipper, "I'll open a bottle of port for you. I 'appened to see it in the store this mornin', and I always think a bottle of port's the right thing after a funeral. I mean, it's not like beer and whisky. There's somethin' serious about port."

"I never thought of it before," said Frith, "but I quite see what you mean."

"I'm not coming," said Fred. "I've got a hump. Can I go along with you, Doctor?"

"If you like."

"We've all got a 'ump," said Captain Nichols. "That's why I vote we 'ave a bottle of port. It won't take the 'ump away. Not by any manner of means. It'll make it worse if anythin', at least that's my experience, but it means you can enjoy it, if you follow me, you get something out of it, and it's not wasted."

"Go to hell," said Fred.

"Come on, Frith. If you're the man I take you for, you and me can drink a bottle of port without strainin' ourselves."

"We live in degenerate days," said Frith. "Two-bottle men, three-bottle men, they're as extinct as the dodo."

"An Australian bird," said Captain Nichols.

"If two grown men can't drink one bottle of port between them I despair of the human race. Babylon is fallen, is fallen."

"Exactly," replied Captain Nichols.

They got into the dinghy and a blackfellow rowed them out to the *Fenton*. The doctor and Fred walked slowly on. When they reached the hotel they went in.

"Let's go to your room," said Fred.

The doctor poured himself out a whisky and soda and gave one to Fred.

"We're sailing at dawn," said the boy.

"Are you? Have you seen Louise?"

"No."

"Aren't you going to?"

"No."

Dr. Saunders shrugged his shoulders. It was no business of his. For a while they drank and smoked in silence.

"I've told you so much," the boy said at last, "I may as well tell you the rest."

"I'm not curious."

"I've wanted to tell someone badly. Sometimes I could hardly prevent myself from telling Nichols. Thank God, I wasn't such a fool as that. Grand opportunity for blackmail it would have been for him."

"He isn't the sort of man I'd choose to confide a secret to."

Fred gave a little derisive chuckle.

"It wasn't my fault, really. It was just rotten luck. It is bloody that your life should be ruined by an accident like that. It's so damned unfair. My people are in a very good position. I was in one of the best firms in Sydney. Eventually, my old man was going to buy me a partnership. He's got a lot of influence and he could have thrown business in my way. I could have made plenty of money and sooner or later of course I should have married and settled down. I expect I should have gone into politics like Father did. If ever anyone had a chance I had. And look at me now. No home, no name, no prospects, a couple of hundred pounds in my belt and whatever the old man's sent to Batavia. Not a friend in the world."

"You've got youth. You've got some education. And you're not bad-looking."

"That's what makes me laugh. If I'd had a squint in my eye or a hump-back I'd have been all right. I'd be in Sydney now. You're no beauty, Doctor."

"I am conscious of the fact and resigned to it."

"Resigned to it! Thank your lucky stars every day of your life."

Dr. Saunders smiled.

"I'm not prepared to go as far as that."

But the foolish boy was desperately serious.

"I don't want you to think I'm conceited. God knows I've got nothing to be conceited about. But, you know, I've always been

able to get any girl I wanted to. Oh, almost since I was a kid. I thought it rather a lark. After all, you're only young once. I didn't see why I shouldn't have all the fun I could get. D'you blame me?"

"No. The only people who would are those who never had your opportunities."

"I never went out of my way to get them. But when they practically asked for it—well, I should have been a fool not to take what I could get. It used to make me laugh sometimes to see them all in a dither and often I'd pretend I didn't notice. They'd get furious with me. Girls are funny, you know, nothing makes them so mad as a chap standing off. Of course, I never let it interfere with my work; I'm not a fool, you know, in any sense of the word, and I wanted to get on."

"An only child, were you?"

"No. I've got a brother. He went into the business with Father. He's married. And I've got a married sister, too."

"Well, one Sunday last year, a chap brought his wife to spend the day up at our house. His name was Hudson. He was a Roman Catholic, and he'd got a lot of influence with the Irish and the Italians. Father said he could make all the difference at the election, and he told Mother she was to do them proud. They came up to dinner, the Premier came and brought his wife, and Mother gave them enough to eat to feed a regiment. After dinner Father took them into his den to talk business and the rest of us went and sat in the garden. I'd wanted to go fishing, but Father said I'd got to stay and make myself civil. Mother and Mrs. Darnes had been at school together."

"Who was Mrs. Darnes?"

"Mr. Darnes is the Premier. He's the biggest man in Australia."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"They always had a lot to talk about. They tried to be polite to Mrs. Hudson, but I could see they didn't much like her. She was doing her best to be nice to them, admiring everything and buttering them up, but the more she laid it on the less they liked it. At last, Mother asked me if I wouldn't show her round the garden. We strolled off and the first thing she said was: 'For God's sake give me a cigarette.' She gave me a look when I lit it for her and she said: 'You're a very good-looking boy.' 'D'you think so?' I said. 'I suppose you've been told that before?' she said. 'Only by Mother,' I said, 'and I thought perhaps she was

prejudiced.' She asked me if I was fond of dancing and I said I was, so she said she was having tea at the Australia next day and if I liked to come in after the office we could have a dance together. I wasn't keen on it, so I said I couldn't; then she said: 'What about Tuesday or Wednesday?' I couldn't very well say I was engaged both days, so I said Tuesday would suit me all right; and when they'd gone away I told Father and Mother. She didn't much like the idea, but Father was all for it. He said it wouldn't suit his book at all to have us stand-offish. 'I didn't like the way she kept on looking at him,' said Mother, but Father told her not to be silly. 'Why, she's old enough to be his mother,' he said. 'How old is she?' Mother said: 'She'll never see forty again.'

"She was nothing to look at. Thin as a rail. Her neck was absolutely scraggy. Tallish. She had a long thin face, with hollow cheeks, and a brown skin, all one colour, rather leathery, if you know what I mean; and she never seemed to take any trouble with her hair, it always looked as though it would come down in a minute; and she'd have a wisp hanging down in front of her ear or over her forehead. I do like a woman to have a neat head, don't you? It was black, rather like a gipsy's, and she had enormous black eyes. They made her face. When you talked to her you didn't really see anything else. She didn't look British, she looked like a foreigner, a Hungarian or something like that. There was nothing attractive about her.

"Well, I went on the Tuesday. She knew how to dance, you couldn't deny that. You know, I'm rather keen on dancing. I enjoyed myself more than I expected. She had a lot to say for herself. I shouldn't have had a bad time if there hadn't been some of my pals there. I knew they'd rot my head off for dancing the whole afternoon with an old geyser like that. There are ways *and* ways of dancing. It didn't take me long to see what she was up to. I couldn't help laughing. Poor old cow, I thought, if it gives her any pleasure, well, let her have it. She asked me to go to the pictures with her one night when her husband had to go to a meeting. I said I didn't mind, and we made a date. I held her hand at the pictures. I thought it'd please her and it didn't do me any harm, and afterwards she said, Couldn't we walk a bit. We were pretty friendly by then; she was interested in my work, and she wanted to know all about my home. We talked about racing, I told her there was nothing I'd like to do more than ride in a big race myself. In the dark she wasn't so bad, and I kissed her. Well,

the end of it was that we went to a place I knew and we had a bit of a rough and tumble. I did it more out of politeness than anything else. I thought that would be the finish. Not a bit of it. She went crazy about me. She said she'd fallen in love with me the first time she saw me. I don't mind telling you that just at first I was a bit flattered. She had something. Those great flashing eyes, sometimes they made me feel all funny, and that gipsy look, I don't know, it was so unusual, it seemed to take you right away and you couldn't believe you were in good old Sydney; it was like living in a story about Nihilists and Grand Dukes and I don't know what all. By God, she was hot stuff. I thought I knew a thing or two about all that, but when she took me in hand I found I didn't know a thing. I'm not particular, but really, sometimes she almost disgusted me. She was proud of it. She used to say that after a chap had loved her, other women were duller than cold roast mutton.

"I couldn't help liking it in a way, but, you know, I didn't feel easy about it. You don't like a woman to be absolutely shameless. There was no satisfying her either. She made me see her every day, and she'd ring me up at the office and ring me up at home. I told her for God's sake to be careful; after all she had a husband to think of, and there was Father and Mother—Father was quite capable of packing me off to a sheep-station for a year if he had the smallest suspicion that things weren't going right, but she said she didn't care. She said if I was packed off to a sheep-station she'd come with me. She didn't seem to mind what risks she took, and if it hadn't been for me it would have been all over Sydney in a week. She'd telephone to Mother and ask if I couldn't go to supper at her place and make a four at bridge, and when I was there she'd make love to me under her husband's nose. When she saw I was scared she laughed her head off. It excited her. Pat Hudson just treated me like a boy; he never took much notice of me; he fancied himself at bridge, and got a lot of fun out of telling me all about it. I didn't dislike him. He was a bit of a rough-neck, and he could put his liquor away rather, but he was a smart fellow in his way. He was ambitious, and he liked having me there because I was Father's son. He was quite ready to come in with Father, but he wanted to get something pretty substantial for himself out of it.

"I was getting a bit fed up with it all. I couldn't call my soul my own. And she was as jealous as hell. If we were anywhere and I happened to look at a girl it would be; 'Who's that? Why d'you

"Then she began to cry, right there in the middle of the street, with people passing all the time. I could have killed her.

" 'Fred, it's no good,' she said, 'you can't throw me over. You're everything in the world to me.'

" 'Oh, don't be so silly,' I said. 'You're an old woman and I'm hardly more than a kid. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

" 'What does that matter?' she said. 'I love you with all my heart.'

" 'Well, I don't love you,' I said. 'I can't bear the sight of you. I tell you it's finished. For God's sake leave me alone.'

" 'Isn't there anything I can do to make you love me?' she said.

" 'Nothing,' I said. 'I'm fed up with you.'

" 'Then I shall kill myself,' she said.

" 'That's your trouble,' I said, and I walked away quickly before she could stop me.

"But although I said it just like that, as if I didn't care a damn, I wasn't easy about it. They say people who threaten to commit suicide never do, but she wasn't like other people. The fact is, she was a madwoman. She was capable of anything. She was capable of coming up to the house and shooting herself in the garden. She was capable of swallowing poison and leaving some awful letter behind. She might accuse me of anything. You see, I hadn't only myself to think of, I had to think of Father, too. If I was mixed up in something it might have done him an awful lot of harm, especially just then. And he isn't the sort of man to let you off easy, if you've made a fool of yourself. I can tell you I didn't sleep much that night. I worried myself sick. I should have been furious if I'd found her hanging about the street outside the office in the morning, but in a way I'd have been rather relieved. She wasn't there. There was no letter for me either. I began to get a bit scared, and I had a job to prevent myself ringing up to see if she was all right. When the evening paper came out I just made a grab at it. Pat Hudson was pretty prominent, and if something had happened to her there'd sure to be a lot about it. But there wasn't a thing. That day there was nothing, no sign of her, no telephone message, no letter, nothing in the paper, and the day after, and the day after that, it was just the same. I began to think it was all right and I was rid of her. I came to the conclusion it was all a bluff. Oh, my God, how thankful I was! But I'd had my lesson. I made

up my mind to be damned careful in future. No more middle-aged women for me. I'd got all nervous and wrought-up. You can't think what a relief it was to me. I don't want to make myself out any better than I am, but I have some sense of decency and really that woman was the limit. I know it sounds silly, but sometimes she just horrified me. I'm all for having a bit of fun, but, damn it all, I don't want to make a beast of myself."

Dr. Saunders did not reply. He understood pretty well what the boy meant. Careless and hot-blooded, with the callousness of youth, he took his pleasure where he found it, but youth is not only callous, it is modest, and his instinct was outraged by the unbridled passion of the experienced woman.

"Then about ten days later I got a letter from her. The envelope was typewritten or I shouldn't have opened it. But it was quite sensible. It started, 'Dear Fred.' She said she was awfully sorry she'd made me all those scenes, and she thought she must have been rather crazy, but she'd had time to calm down and she didn't want to be a nuisance to me. She said it was her nerves, and she'd taken me much too seriously. Everything was all right now, and she didn't bear me any ill-will. She said I mustn't blame her, because it was partly my fault for being so absurdly good-looking. Then she said she was starting for New Zealand next day, and was going to be away for three months. She'd got a doctor to say she needed a complete change. Then she said Pat was going to Newcastle that night, and would I come in for a few minutes to say good-bye to her. She gave me her solemn word of honour that she wouldn't be troublesome, all that was over and done with, but somehow or other Pat had got wind of something, it was nothing important, but it was just as well I told the same story as her if by any chance he asked me any questions. She hoped I'd come, because though it couldn't matter to me and I was absolutely safe, things might be a little awkward for her and she certainly didn't want to get into any trouble if she could help it.

"I knew it was true about Hudson going to Newcastle because my old man had said something about it at breakfast that morning. The letter was absolutely normal. Sometimes she wrote in a scrawl that you could hardly read, but she could write very well when she wanted to, and I could see that when she'd written this she'd been absolutely calm. I was a little anxious about what she'd said about Pat. She had insisted on taking the most awful risks, though I'd warned her over and over again. If he'd heard anything it did seem

better that we should tell the same lie, and forewarned is forearmed, isn't it? So I rang her up and said I'd be there about six. She was so casual over the telephone that I was almost surprised. It sounded as though she didn't much care if I came or not.

"When I got there she shook hands with me as if we were just friends. She asked me if I'd like some tea. I said I'd had it before I came. She said she wouldn't keep me a minute because she was going to the pictures. She was all dressed up. I asked her what was the matter with Pat, and she said it wasn't really very serious, only he'd heard that I'd been at the pictures with her, and he didn't much like it. She'd said it was just an accident. Once I'd seen her sitting by herself and come over and sat by her, and another time we'd met in the vestibule, and as she was alone I'd paid for her seat and we'd gone in together. She said she didn't think Pat would mention it, but if he did, she wanted me to back her up. Of course I said I would. She mentioned the two times he was asking about, so that I should know, and then she began talking about her journey. She knew New Zealand well and she started talking about it. I'd never been there. It sounded fine. She was going to stay with friends and she made me laugh telling me about them. She could be jolly nice when she liked. She was awfully good company when she was in a good temper, I must admit that, and I never realised that time was passing. She was just like what she was when I first knew her. At last she got up and said she'd better be going. I suppose I'd been there about half an hour, maybe three-quarters. She gave me her hand and she looked at me half laughing.

" 'It wouldn't really hurt you to kiss me good-bye, would it?' she said.

"She said it chaffingly, and I laughed.

" 'No, I don't suppose it would,' I said.

"I bent down and kissed her. Or rather she kissed me. She put her arms round my neck and when I tried to break away she wouldn't let me go. She just clung to me like a vine. And then she said, as she was going away to-morrow, wouldn't I have her just once more. I said she'd promised she wouldn't make a nuisance of herself, and she said she didn't mean to but, seeing me, she couldn't help herself, and she swore it would be the last time. After all, she was going away, and it couldn't matter just once. And all the time she was kissing me and stroking my face. She said she didn't blame me for anything, and she was just a foolish

woman and wouldn't I be kind to her? Well, it had all gone off so well and I was so relieved that she seemed to accept the situation; I didn't want to be a brute. If she'd been staying I'd have refused at any price, but as she was going away I thought I might just as well send her away happy.

" 'All right,' I said, 'let's go upstairs.' "

"It was a little two-storey house, and the bedroom and spare-room were on the first floor. They've been building a lot of them round Sydney lately.

" 'No,' she said. 'The whole place is in a mess.

"She drew me towards the sofa. It was one of those Chesterfields, and there was lots of room to cuddle up in it.

" 'I love you, I love you,' she kept on saying.

"Suddenly the door opened. I sprang up and there was Hudson. For a minute he was just as startled as I was. Then he shouted at me, I don't know what he said, and jumped. He let out his fist, but I dodged it; I'm pretty quick on my feet, and I've done a bit of boxing; and then he just chucked himself at me. We grappled. He was a big, powerful chap, bigger than me, but I'm pretty strong. He was trying to get me down, but I wasn't going to let him do that if I could help it. We were struggling all over the room. He hit me when he could, and I hit him back. Once I got away from him, but he charged me like a bull and I staggered. We knocked down chairs and tables. We had a hell of a fight. I tried to get away from him again, but I couldn't. He wanted to trip me up. It didn't take me long to find out he was a lot stronger than me. But I was more active. He'd got his coat on and I hadn't got anything but my undies. Then he got me down; I don't know if I slipped, or if he just forced me, but we were rolling over on the floor like a couple of madmen. He got on top of me and began hitting my face; there was nothing I could do then, and I just tried to protect it with my arm. Suddenly I thought he was going to kill me. God, I was scared! I made a hell of an effort and slipped away, but he was on me again like a flash of lightning. I felt my strength giving out; he put his knee on my windpipe and I knew I'd choke. I tried to shout, but I couldn't. I threw out my right arm and suddenly I felt a revolver put in my hand; I swear I didn't know what I was doing, it all happened in a second, I twisted my arm and fired. He gave a cry and started back. I fired again. He gave a great groan and rolled off me on to the floor. I slid away and jumped to my feet.

"I was trembling like a leaf."

Fred threw himself back in his chair and closed his eyes, so that Dr. Saunders thought he was going to faint. He was as white as a sheet and great beads of sweat stood on his forehead. He took a long breath.

"I was in a sort of daze. I saw Florrie kneel down, and though you wouldn't believe it I noticed that she was careful about it so that she shouldn't get any blood on her. She felt his pulse and she pulled down his eyelid. She got up.

" 'I think it's all right,' she said. 'He's dead.' She gave me a funny look. 'It wouldn't have been very nice if we'd had to polish him off.'"

"I was horror-struck. I suppose I couldn't have been all there or I wouldn't have said anything so stupid as I did.

" 'I thought he was at Newcastle,' I said.

" 'No, he didn't go,' she said. 'He had a telephone message.'"

" 'What telephone message?' I said. Somehow I couldn't understand what she was talking about. 'Who sent it?'"

" 'D'you know that she almost laughed.

" 'I did,' she said.

" 'What for?' I said. Then it suddenly flashed across me. 'You don't mean to say it was a put-up job?'"

" 'Don't be silly,' she said. 'What you've got to do now is to keep your head. You go home and have supper quite quietly with the family. I'm going to the pictures like I said I would.'"

" 'You're crazy,' I said.

" 'No, I'm not,' she said. 'I know what I'm doing. You'll be all right if you do what I say. You just behave as if nothing had happened and leave it all to me. Don't forget that if it comes out you'll hang.'"

"I expect I nearly jumped out of my skin when she said that, because she laughed. My God, the nerve that woman had got!"

" 'You've got nothing to be afraid of,' she said. 'I won't let them touch a hair of your head. You're my property, and I know how to look after what belongs to me. I love you and I want you, and when it's all over and forgotten we'll be married. What a fool you were to think I was ever going to give you up.'"

"I swear to you that I felt my blood run icy in my veins. I was in a trap and there was no getting out of it. I stared at her and I hadn't a thing to say. I shall never forget the look on her face. Suddenly she looked at my undervest. I hadn't got anything on but that and my drawers.

" 'Oh, look!' she said.

"I looked at myself and saw that on one side it was just dripping with blood. I was just going to touch it, I don't know why, when she caught hold of my hand.

" 'Don't do that,' she said. 'Wait a minute.'

"She got a newspaper and began rubbing it.

" 'Hold your head down,' she said. 'I'll take it off.'

"I bent my head and she skinned me.

" 'Have you got any blood anywhere else?' she said. 'Damned lucky for you you hadn't got your trousers on.'

"My drawers were all right. I dressed myself as quick as I could. She took the vest.

" 'I'll burn it and I'll burn the paper,' she said. 'I've got a fire in the kitchen. It's my washing day.'

"I looked at Hudson. He was dead all right. It made me feel rather sick to look at him. There was a great pool of blood on the carpet.

" 'Are you ready?' she said.

" 'Yes,' I said.

"She came out in the passage with me and just before she opened the door she put her arms round my neck and kissed me as if she wanted to eat me alive.

" 'My darling,' she said. 'Darling. Darling.'

"She opened the door and I slipped out. It was pitch dark.

"I seemed to walk in a dream. I walked pretty quick. As a matter of fact, I had all I could do not to run. I had my hat as far down as it would go and my collar turned up, but I hardly passed anybody and no one could have recognised me. I went a long way round, as she'd said I was to, and took the tram from right away in the neighbourhood of Chester Avenue.

"They were just going to sit down to dinner when I got home. We always had late dinner and I ran upstairs to wash my hands. I looked at myself in the glass, and d'you know, I was absolutely astonished because I looked just the same as usual. But when I sat down and Mother said, 'Tired, Fred? You're looking very white,' I went as red as a turkey-cock. I didn't manage to eat very much. Luckily I didn't have to talk, we never talked much when we were alone, and after dinner Father started to read some reports and Mother looked at the evening paper. I was feeling awful."

"Half a minute," said the doctor. "You said you suddenly felt a revolver in your hand. I don't quite understand."

"Florrie put it there."

"How did she get it?"

"How should I know? She took it out of Pat's pocket when he was on the top of me or else she had it there. I only fired in self-defence."

"Go on."

"Suddenly Mother said, 'What's the matter, Fred?' It came so unexpectedly and her voice was so—gentle, it just broke me. I tried to control myself; I couldn't, I just burst out crying. 'Hullo, what's this?' said Father. Mother put her arms round me and rocked me as if I was a baby. She kept on asking me what was the matter, and at first I wouldn't say. At last I had to. I pulled myself together. I made a clean breast of the whole thing. Mother was frightfully upset, and started weeping, but Father shut her up. She began reproaching me, but he wouldn't let her do that either. 'All that doesn't matter now,' he said. His face was like thunder. If the earth could have opened and swallowed me on a word of his, he'd have said the word. I told them everything.' Father had always said the only chance a criminal has is to be absolutely frank with his lawyer, and that a lawyer couldn't do a thing unless he knew every single fact.

"I finished. Mother and I looked at Father. He'd stared at me all the time I was speaking, but now he looked down. You could see he was thinking like hell. You know, in some ways Father's an extraordinary man. He's always been very keen on culture. He's one of the trustees of the Art Gallery and he's on the committee that gets up the symphony concerts and all that. He's gentlemanly and rather quiet. Mother used to say he looked very distinguished. He was always very mild and amiable and polite. You'd have thought he wouldn't hurt a fly. He was everything he seemed, but there was a lot more in him than that. After all, he'd got the biggest lawyer's business in Sydney, and there was nothing he didn't know about people. Of course he was highly respected, but everyone knew it wasn't much good trying on any hanky-panky with him. And it was the same in politics. He ran the party and old Darnes never did a thing without consulting him. He could have been Premier himself if he'd wanted to, but he didn't, he was quite satisfied just to be in the Government and manage the whole shooting match behind the scenes.

" 'You mustn't blame the boy too much, Jim,' Mother said.

"He made a sort of impatient movement with his hand. I

almost thought he wasn't thinking about me at all. It sent a chill down my spine. He spoke at last.

" 'It looks very much like a put-up job between those two,' he said. 'Hudson has been rather difficult lately. I shouldn't be surprised if there was blackmail behind it. And she double-crossed him.'

" 'What's Fred to do?' said Mother.

"Father looked at me. You know, he looked just as mild as always and his voice had the same rather pleasant note in it. 'If he's caught, he'll hang,' he said. Mother gave a shriek and Father frowned a little. 'Oh, I'm not going to let him hang,' he said. 'Don't be afraid. He can escape that by going out now and shooting himself.' 'Jim, d'you want to kill me?' said Mother. 'Unfortunately that wouldn't help us much,' he said. 'What?' I asked. 'Your shooting yourself,' he said. 'The thing's got to be hushed up. We can't afford a scandal. We're going to have a stiff fight at the election, and with me out of it and all this we shouldn't have much chance.' 'Father, I'm so awfully sorry,' I said. 'I don't doubt that,' he said. 'Fools and blackguards generally are when they have to take the consequences of their actions.'

"We were all silent for a bit and then I said, 'I'm not sure if it wouldn't be the best thing if I went and shot myself.' 'Don't be so stupid,' he said; 'that would only make things worse. D'you think the newspapers are such fools that they wouldn't put two and two together? Don't talk. Let me think.' We sat like mutes. Mother was holding my hand. 'There's the woman to deal with, too,' he said at last. 'We're in her clutches all right. Nice to have her as a daughter-in-law.' Mother didn't dare say a word. Father leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. A little smile came into his eyes. 'Fortunately we live in the most democratic country in the world,' he said. 'Nobody is above corruption.' He liked saying that. He looked at us for a minute or two. He had a way of thrusting out his jaw when he'd made up his mind to do something and meant to put it through that I knew as well as Mother did. 'I suppose it'll be in the paper to-morrow,' he said. 'I'll go and see Mrs. Hudson. I think I know what she's going to say. If she sticks to her story, barring accidents I don't think anyone can prove anything. It looks to me as if she'd worked it all out pretty thoroughly. The police will question her, but I'll see they don't interview her without my being present.' 'And what about Fred?' said Mother. Father smiled again. You'd have sworn butter

couldn't melt in his mouth. 'Fred'll go to bed and stay there,' he said. 'By a merciful interposition of providence there's a lot of scarlet fever about, an epidemic practically; to-morrow or the next day we'll rush him off to the fever hospital.' 'But why?' asked Mother. 'What's the use of that?' 'My dear,' said Father, 'it's the best way I know of keeping someone out of the way for a few weeks with perfect security.' 'But supposing he catches it?' said Mother. 'He'd be acting natural,' he said.

"In the morning Father rung up my boss and said I'd got a temperature and he didn't half like the look of it. He was keeping me in bed and had sent for the doctor. The doctor came all right. He was my uncle, Mother's brother, and he'd attended me since I was born. He said he couldn't say for certain, it looked like scarlet fever, but he wouldn't send me to the hospital till the symptoms declared themselves. Mother told the cook and the maid that they weren't to come near me, and she'd look after me herself.

"The evening paper was full of the murder. Mrs. Hudson had gone to the pictures by herself, and when she came home and went into the sitting-room she had found the body of her husband. They didn't keep a servant. You don't know Sydney, but the house was a sort of little villa in a quarter they'd been developing; it stood in its own ground, and the next house was twenty or thirty yards away. Florrie didn't know the people who lived in it, but she ran there and battered on the door till they opened it. They were in bed and asleep. She told them her husband had been murdered and asked them to come quickly; they ran along, and there he was lying all heaped up on the floor. The man from the other house remembered after a while that he'd better call up the police. Mrs. Hudson was hysterical. She threw herself on her husband, screaming and crying, and they had to drag her away.

"Then there were all the details that the reporters had managed to pick up. The police doctor thought the man had been dead two or three hours. Strangely enough, he'd been shot with his own revolver, but the possibility of suicide was dismissed at once. When Mrs. Hudson had collected herself a bit she told the police that she'd spent the evening at a picture palace. She had part of the ticket still in her bag, and she'd spoken while there to two people she knew. She explained that she'd decided to go to the pictures that evening because her husband had arranged to go to Newcastle. He'd come home shortly before six and told her he wasn't going. She said she'd stay at home with him and get him his

supper, but he told her to go as she'd intended. Someone was coming to see him on important business, and he wanted to be alone. She went out and that was the last she saw of him alive. There were signs of a terrific struggle in the room. Hudson had evidently fought desperately for his life. Nothing had been stolen from the house, and the police and the reporters at once jumped to the conclusion that the crime had a political motive. Passions run pretty high politically in Sydney, and Pat Hudson was known to be mixed up with some very rough characters. He had a lot of enemies. The police were prosecuting their enquiries, and the public were asked to inform them if they had seen a suspicious-looking person, possibly an Italian, in the neighbourhood or in a tram coming away from there who bore signs of having been engaged in a fight. A couple of nights later an ambulance came to our house and I was taken to the hospital. They kept me there for three or four days, and then I was slipped out and brought to the place where the Fenton was waiting for me."

"But that's false," said the doctor. "How did they manage to get the death certificate?"

"I know no more than you do. I've been trying to puzzle it out. I didn't enter the hospital as myself, I was told to call myself Blake. I've been asking myself if someone else didn't go in as me. They'd done all they could in the papers to pretend there wasn't an epidemic, but there was, and the hospital was crowded. The nurses were just run off their feet, and there was a lot of confusion. It's pretty clear that someone died and was buried in my place. Father's clever, you know, and he wouldn't stick at much."

"I think I should like to meet your father," said Dr. Saunders.

"It's struck me that perhaps people got suspicious. After all we must have been seen about together, and they may have started asking questions. I expect the police went into it all pretty thoroughly. I dare say Father thought it safer to have me die. I expect he got a lot of sympathy."

"It may be that's why she hanged herself," said the doctor.

Fred started violently.

"How did you know that?"

"I read it in the paper Erik Christessen brought the other night from Frith's."

"Did you know it was anything to do with me?"

"No, not till you began to tell me. Then I remembered the name."

"It gave me an awful turn when I read it."

"Why d'you think she did it?"

"It said in the paper she'd been worried by malicious gossip. I don't think Father would be satisfied till he got even with her. D'you know, I think the thing that made him see red was that she'd wanted to marry into his family. He must have got a lot of pleasure when he told her I was dead. She was horrible, and I hated her, but, by God, she must have loved me to do that." Fred hesitated for a moment reflectively. "Father knew the whole story. I shouldn't put it past him to tell her that I'd confessed before my death and the police were going to arrest her."

Dr. Saunders slowly nodded. It seemed to him a pretty device. He only wondered that the woman had adopted such an unpleasant means of death as hanging. Of course it looked as though she were in a hurry to do what she intended. Fred's supposition seemed very plausible.

"Anyway, she's out of it," said Fred. "And I've got to go on."

"You surely don't regret her?"

"Regret her? She's ruined my life. And the rotten thing is that the whole thing happened by the merest chance. I never intended to have an affair with her. I wouldn't have touched her if I'd known she was going to take it seriously. If Father had let me go out fishing that Sunday, I shouldn't even have met her. I don't know what to make of anything. And except for that I should never have come to this blasted island. I seem to bring misfortune wherever I go."

"You should put a little vitriol on your handsome face," said the doctor. "You are certainly a public danger."

"Oh, don't sneer at me. I'm so awfully unhappy. I've never cared for a chap like I cared for Erik. I shall never forgive myself for his death."

"Don't think he killed himself on your account. You had very little to do with that. Unless I'm greatly mistaken, he killed himself because he couldn't survive the shock of finding out that the person whom he'd endowed with every quality and every virtue was, after all, but human. It was madness on his part. That's the worst of being an idealist; you won't accept people as they are. Wasn't it Christ who said, 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do'?"

Fred stared at him with perplexed and haggard eyes.

"But you're not a religious man, are you?"

"Sensible men are all of the same religion. And what is that? Sensible men never tell."

"My father wouldn't say that. He'd say that sensible men don't go out of their way to give offence. He'd say, it looks well to go to church and you must respect the prejudices of your neighbours. He'd say, what is the good of getting off the fence when you can sit on it very comfortably? Nichols and I have talked about it all. You wouldn't believe it, but he can talk about religion by the hour. It's funny, I've never met a meaner crook, or a man who had less idea of decency, and yet he honestly believes in God. And hell, too. But it never strikes him that he may go there. Other people are going to suffer for their sins and serve 'em damn well right. But he's a stout fellow, he's all right, and when he does the dirty on a friend it isn't of any importance; it's what anyone would do under the circumstances, and God isn't going to hold that up against him. At first I thought he was just a hypocrite. But he isn't. That's the odd thing about it."

"It shouldn't make you angry. The contrast between a man's professions and his actions is one of the most diverting spectacles that life offers."

"You look at it from the outside and you can laugh, but I look at it from the in, and I'm a ship that's lost its bearings. What does it all mean? Why are we here? Where are we going? What can we do?"

"My dear boy, you don't expect me to answer, do you? Ever since men picked up a glimmer of intelligence in the primeval forests, they've been asking those questions."

"What do you believe?"

"Do you really want to know? I believe in nothing but myself and my experience. The world consists of me and my thoughts and my feelings; and everything else is mere fancy. Life is a dream in which I create the objects that come before me. Everything knowable, every object of experience, is an idea in my mind, and without my mind it does not exist. There is no possibility and no necessity to postulate anything outside myself. Dream and reality are one. Life is a connected and consistent dream, and when I cease to dream, the world, with its beauty, its pain and sorrow, its unimaginable variety, will cease to be."

"But that's quite incredible," cried Fred.

"That is no reason for me to hesitate to believe it," smiled the doctor.

"Well, I'm not prepared to be made a fool of. If life won't fulfil the demands I make on it, then I have no use for it. It's a dull and stupid play, and it's only waste of time to sit it out."

The doctor's eyes twinkled and a grin puckered his ugly little face.

"Oh, my dear boy, what perfect nonsense you talk. Youth, youth! You're a stranger in the world yet. Presently, like a man on a desert island, you'll learn to do without what you can't get and make the most of what you can. A little commonsense, a little tolerance, a little good-humour, and you don't know how comfortable you can make yourself on this planet."

"By giving up all that makes life worth while. Like you. I want life to be fair. I want life to be brave and honest. I want men to be decent and things to come right in the end. Surely that's not asking too much, is it?"

"I don't know. It's asking more than life can give.

"Don't you mind?"

"Not much."

"You're content to wallow in the gutter."

"I get a certain amount of fun from watching the antics of the other creatures that dwell there."

Fred gave his shoulder an angry shrug and a sigh was wrung from him.

"You believe nothing. You respect nobody. You expect man to be vile. You're a cripple chained to a bath-chair and you think it's just stuff and nonsense that anyone should walk or run."

"I'm afraid you don't very much approve of me," the doctor suggested mildly.

"You've lost heart, hope, faith and awe. What in God's name have you got left?"

"Resignation."

The young man jumped to his feet.

"Resignation? That's the refuge of the beaten." Keep your resignation. I don't want it. I'm not willing to accept evil and ugliness and injustice. I'm not willing to stand by while the good are punished and the wicked go scot-free. If life means that virtue is trampled on and honesty is mocked and beauty is fouled, then to hell with life."

"My dear boy, you must take life as you find it."

"I'm fed up with life as I find it. It fills me with horror. I'll either have it on my own terms or not at all."

Rhodomontade. The boy was nervous and upset. It was very natural. Dr. Saunders had little doubt that in a day or two he would be more sensible, and his reply was designed to check this extravagance.

"Have you ever read that laughter is the only gift the gods have vouchsafed to man that he does not share with the beasts?"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Fred sullenly.

"I have acquired resignation by the help of an unfailing sense of the ridiculous."

"Laugh, then. Laugh your head off."

"So long as I can," returned the doctor, looking at him with his tolerant humour, "the gods may destroy me, but I remain unvanquished."

Rhodomontade? Perhaps.

The conversation might have proceeded indefinitely if at that moment there had not come a knock on the door.

"Who the devil is that?" cried Fred irascibly.

A boy who spoke a little English came in to say that someone wished to see Fred, but they could not understand who it was. Fred, shrugging his shoulders, was about to go when an idea struck him and he stopped.

"Is it a man or a woman?"

He had to repeat the question in two or three different ways before the boy caught his meaning. Then with a smile brightened by the appreciation of his own cleverness, he answered that it was a woman.

"Louise." Fred shook his head with decision. "You say, Tuan sick, no can come."

The boy understood this and withdrew.

"You'd better see her," said the doctor.

"Never. Erik was worth ten of her. He meant all the world to me. I loathe the thought of her. I only want to get away. I want to forget. How could she trample on that noble heart!"

Dr. Saunders raised his eyebrows. Language of that sort chilled his sympathy.

"Perhaps she's very unhappy," he suggested mildly.

"I thought you were a cynic. You're a sentimentalist."

"Have you only just discovered it?"

The door was slowly opened, pushed wide, silently, and Louise

stood in the doorway. She did not come forward. She did not speak. She looked at Fred, and a faint, shy, deprecating smile hovered on her lips. You could see that she was nervous. Her whole body seemed to express a timid uncertainty. It had, as much as her face, an air of appeal. Fred stared at her. He did not move. He did not ask her to come in. His face was sullen and in his eyes was a cold and relentless hatred. The little smile froze on her lips and she seemed to give a gasp, not with her mouth, but with her body, as though a sharp pain pierced her heart. She stood there, for two or three minutes, it seemed, and neither of them moved an eyelash. Their eyes met in an insistent stare. Then, very slowly, and as silently as when she opened it, she drew the door to and softly closed it on herself. The two men were left alone once more. To the doctor the scene had appeared strangely, horribly pathetic.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE *Fenton* sailed at dawn. The ship that was to take Dr. Saunders to Bali was due in the course of the afternoon. She was to stay only just long enough to take on cargo, and so, toward eleven, hiring a horse-cab, the doctor drove out to Swan's plantation. He thought it would be uncivil to go without saying good-bye.

When he arrived he found the old man sitting in a chair in the garden. It was the same chair as that in which Erik Christessen had sat on the night when he saw Fred come out of Louise's room. The doctor passed the time of day with him. The old man did not remember him, but he was spry enough and asked the doctor a number of questions without paying any attention to the replies. Presently Louise came down the steps from the house. She shook hands with him. She bore no sign that she had passed through an emotional crisis, but greeted him with that composed and winning smile that she had had the first time he saw her on the way back from the bathing pool. She wore a brown sarong of batik and a little native coat. Her very fair hair was plaited and bound round her head.

"Won't you come inside and sit down?" she said. "Dad is working. He'll be along presently."

The doctor accompanied her into the large living-room. The

jealousies were drawn and the subdued light was pleasant. There was not much comfort in the room, but it was cool, and a great bunch of yellow cannas in a bowl, flaming like the new-risen sun, gave it a peculiar and exotic distinction.

"We haven't told Grandpa about Erik. He liked him; they were both Scandinavians, you know. We were afraid it would upset him. But perhaps he knows; one can never tell. Sometimes, weeks after, he'll let fall a remark and we find out that he's known all along something that we thought we'd better say nothing about."

She talked in a leisurely manner, with a soft, rather full voice, as though of indifferent things.

"Old age is very strange. It has a kind of aloofness. It's lost so much, that you can hardly look upon the old as quite human any more. But sometimes you have a feeling that they've acquired a sort of new sense that tells them things that we can never know."

"Your grandfather was gay enough the other night. I hope I shall be as alert at his age."

"He was excited. He likes having new people to talk to. But that's just like a phonograph that you wind up. That's the machine. But there's something else there, like a little animal, a rat burrowing away or a squirrel turning in its cage, that's busy within him with things we know nothing of. I feel its existence and I wonder what it's about."

The doctor had nothing to say to this, and silence for a minute or two fell upon them.

"Will you have a stengah?" she said.

"No, thank you."

They were sitting opposite one another in easy chairs. The large room surrounded them with strangeness. It seemed to await something.

"The Fenton sailed this morning," said the doctor.

"I know."

He looked at her reflectively and she returned his gaze with tranquillity.

"I'm afraid Christessen's death was a great shock to you."

"I was very fond of him."

"He talked to me a great deal about you the night before he died. He was very much in love with you. He told me he was going to marry you."

"Yes." She gave him a fleeting glance. "Why did he kill himself?"

"He saw that boy coming out of your room."

She looked down. She reddened a little.

"That's impossible."

"Fred told me. He was there when he jumped over the rail of the veranda."

"Who told Fred I was engaged to Erik?"

"I did."

"I thought it was that yesterday afternoon when he wouldn't see me. And then when I came in and he looked at me like that I knew it was hopeless."

There was no despair in her manner, but a collected acceptance of the inevitable. You might almost have said that there was in her tone a shrug of the shoulders.

"You weren't in love with him, then?"

She leaned her face on her hand and for a moment seemed to look into her heart.

"It's all rather complicated," she said.

"Anyhow, it's no business of mine."

"Oh, I don't mind telling you. I don't care what you think of me."

"Why should you?"

"He was very good-looking. D'you remember the other afternoon when I met you in the plantation? I couldn't take my eyes off him. And then at supper, and afterwards when we danced together. I suppose you'd call it love at first sight."

"I'm not sure that I would."

"Oh?" She looked at him with an air of surprise, which changed to a quick, scrutinising glance, as though for the first time she paid him attention. "I knew he'd taken a fancy to me. I felt something I'd never felt in my life before. I wanted him simply frightfully. I generally sleep like a log. I was terribly restless all night. Father wanted to bring you his translation and I offered to drive him down. I knew he was only staying a day or two. Perhaps if he'd been staying a month it wouldn't have happened. I should have thought there was plenty of time, and if I'd seen him every day for a week I dare say I shouldn't have bothered about him. And afterwards, I didn't regret it. I felt contented and free. I lay awake for a little while after he left me that night. I was awfully happy, but, you know, I didn't really care if I never saw him again. It was very comfortable to be alone. I don't suppose you'll know what I mean, but I felt that my soul was a little light-headed."

"Have you no fear of consequences?" asked the doctor.

"How do you mean?" She understood and smiled. "Oh, that. Oh, Doctor, I've lived on this island almost all my life. When I was a child I used to play with the children on the estate. My great friend, the daughter of our overseer, is the same age as me and she's been married for four years and has had three babies. You don't imagine sex has many secrets for Malay children. I've heard everything connected with it talked about since I was seven."

"Why did you come to the hotel yesterday?"

"I was distracted. I was awfully fond of Erik. I couldn't believe it when they told me he'd shot himself. I was afraid I was to blame. I wanted to know if it was possible that he knew about Fred."

"You were to blame."

"I'm dreadfully sorry he's dead. I owe a great deal to him. When I was a child I used to worship him. He was like one of Grandpa's old Vikings to me. I've always liked him awfully. But I'm not to blame."

"What makes you think that?"

"He didn't know it, but it wasn't me he loved, it was Mother. She knew it and at the end I think she loved him, too. It's funny if you come to think of it. He was almost young enough to be her son. What he loved in me was my mother, and he never knew that either."

"Didn't you love him?"

"Oh, very much. With my soul, not with my heart, or with my heart, perhaps, and not with my nerves. He was very good. He was wonderfully reliable. He was incapable of unkindness. He was very genuine. There was something almost saintly in him."

She took out her handkerchief and wiped her eyes, for while talking of him she had begun to cry.

"If you weren't in love with him, why did you become engaged to him?"

"I promised Mother I would before she died. I think she felt that in me she would gratify her love for him. And I was very fond of him. I knew him so well. I was very much at home with him. I think if he'd wanted to marry me just when Mother died and I was so unhappy I might have loved him. But he thought I was too young. He didn't want to take advantage of the feelings I had then."

"And then?"

"Daddy didn't very much want me to marry him. He was always waiting for the fairy prince who would come and carry me off to an enchanted castle. I suppose you think Daddy's feckless and unpractical. Of course I didn't believe in a fairy prince, but there's generally something behind Daddy's ideas. He has a sort of instinct for things. He lives in the clouds, if you know what I mean, but very often those clouds glow with the light of heaven. Oh, I suppose if nothing had happened we should have married in the end and been very happy. No one could have helped being happy with Erik. It would have been very nice to see all those places he talked about. I should have liked to go to Sweden, to the place where Grandpa was born, and Venice."

"It's unfortunate that we ever came here. And, after all, it was only a chance; we might just as well have made for Amboyna."

"Could you have gone to Amboyna? I think it was fated from all eternity that you should come here."

"Do you think our destinies are so important that the fates should make such a to-do about them?" smiled the doctor.

She did not answer and for a little while they sat in silence.

"I'm terribly unhappy, you know," she said at last.

"You must try not to grieve too much."

"Oh, I don't grieve."

She spoke with a sort of decision, so that the doctor looked at her with surprise.

"You blame me. Anyone would. I don't blame myself. Erik killed himself because I'd fallen short of the ideal he'd made of me."

"Ah."

Dr. Saunders perceived that her instinct had come to the same conclusion as his reasoning.

"If he'd loved me he might have killed me or he might have forgiven me. Don't you think it's rather stupid, the importance men, white men at least, attach to the act of flesh? D'you know, when I was at school in Auckland I had an attack of religion—girls often have at that age—and in Lent I made a vow that I wouldn't eat anything with sugar in it. After about a fortnight I hankered after something sweet so that it was positive torture. One day I passed a candy shop and I looked at the chocolates in the window and my heart turned round inside me. I went in and bought half a pound and ate them in the street outside, every one, till the bag was empty. I shall never forget what a relief it was. Then I went back to school and denied myself quite comfortably for the rest of Lent.

I told that story to Erik and he laughed. He thought it very natural. He was so tolerant. Don't you think if he'd loved me he would have been tolerant about the other, too?"

"Men are very peculiar in that respect."

"Not Erik. He was so wise and so charitable. I tell you he didn't love me. He loved his ideal. My mother's beauty and my mother's qualities in me and those Shakespeare heroines of his and the princesses in Hans Andersen's fairy tales. What right have people to make an image after their own heart and force it on you and be angry if it doesn't fit you? He wanted to imprison me in his ideal. He didn't care who I was. He wouldn't take me as I am. He wanted to possess my soul, and because he felt that there was somewhere in me something that escaped him, he tried to replace that little spark within me which is me by a phantom of his own fancy. I'm unhappy, but I tell you I don't grieve. And Fred in his way was the same. When he lay by my side that night he said he'd like to stay here always on this island, and marry me and cultivate the plantation, and I don't know what else. He made a picture of his life and I was to fit in it. He wanted, too, to imprison me in his dream. It was a different dream, but it was his dream. But I am I. I don't want to dream anyone else's dream. I want to dream my own. All that's happened is terrible and my heart is heavy, but at the back of my mind I know that it's given me freedom."

She did not speak with emotion, but slowly and in measured terms, with the collected manner that the doctor had always found so singular. He listened attentively. He shuddered a little within himself, for the spectacle of the naked human soul always affected him with horror. He saw there that same bare, ruthless instinct that impelled those shapeless creatures of the beginning of the world's history to force their way through the blind hostility of chance. He wondered what would become of this girl.

"Have you any plan for the future?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"I can wait. I'm young. When Grandpa dies this will be mine. Perhaps I shall sell it. Daddy wants to go to India. The world is wide."

"I must go," said Dr. Saunders. "Can I see your father to say good-bye to him?"

"I'll take you to his study."

She led him along a passage to a smallish room at the side of the house. Frith was sitting at a table littered with manuscripts and

books. He was pounding a typewriter, and the sweat pouring from his fat red face made his spectacles slip down his nose.

"This is the final typing of the ninth canto," he said. "You're going away, aren't you? I'm afraid I shan't have time to show it you."

He had forgotten that Dr. Saunders had fallen asleep while he was reading his translation aloud to him, or if he remembered was undiscouraged.

"I am nearing the end. It has been an arduous task, and I hardly think I could ever have brought it to a successful conclusion but for my little girl's encouragement. It is very right and proper that she should be the chief gainer."

"You mustn't work too hard, Daddy."

"*Tempus fugit*," he murmured. "*Ars longa, vita brevis*."

She put her hand gently on his shoulder and with a smile looked at the sheet of paper in the machine. Once more the doctor was struck by the loving-kindness with which Louise treated her father. With her shrewd sense she could not have failed to form a just estimate of his futile labour.

"We haven't come to disturb you, darling. Dr. Saunders wants to say good-bye."

"Ah, yes, of course," said Frith. He got up from the table. "Well, it's been a treat to see you. In this backwater of life we don't often have visitors. It was kind of you to come to Christensen's funeral yesterday. We Britishers ought to stick together on these occasions. It impresses the Dutch. Not that Christensen was British. But we'd seen a great deal of him since he came to the island, and after all he belonged to the same country as Queen Alexandra. A glass of sherry before you go?"

"No, thank you. I must be getting back."

"I was very much upset when I heard. The Contrôleur told me he had no doubt it was the heat. He wanted to marry Louise. I'm very glad now I wouldn't give my consent. Lack of self-control, of course. The English are the only people who can transplant themselves to strange lands and keep their balance. He'll be a great loss to us. Of course he was a foreigner, but all the same it's a shock. I've felt it very much."

It was evident, however, that he looked upon it as much less serious for a Dane to die than for an Englishman. Frith insisted on coming out into the compound. The doctor, turning round to wave his hand as he drove off, saw him with his arm round his

daughter's waist. A ray of sun finding its way through the heavy leafage of the kanari trees touched her fair hair with gold.

CHAPTER XXX

A MONTH later Dr. Saunders was sitting on the little dusty terrace of the Van Dyke Hotel at Singapore. It was late in the afternoon. From where he sat he could see the street below. Cars dashed past and cabs drawn by two sturdy ponies; rickshaws sped by with a patter of naked feet. Now and then Tamils, tall and emaciated, sauntered along, and in their silence, in the quiet of their stealthy movement, was the night of a far-distant past. Trees shaded the street and the sun splashed down in irregular patches. Chinese women in trousers, with gold pins in their hair, stepped out of the shade into the light like marionettes passing across the stage. Now and then a young planter, deeply sunburned, in a double-brimmed hat and khaki shorts, walked past with the long stride he had learnt tramping over the rubber estates. Two dark-skinned soldiers, very smart in their clean uniforms, strutted by, conscious of their importance. The heat of the day was past, the light was golden, and in the air was a crisp nonchalance as though life, there and then, invited you to take it lightly. A water-cart passed, slithering the dusty road with a stream of water.

Dr. Saunders had spent a fortnight in Java. Now he was catching the first ship that came in for Hong-Kong, and from there he intended to take a coasting vessel to Fu-chou. He was glad he had made the journey. It had taken him out of the rut he had been in so long. It had liberated him from the bonds of unprofitable habits, and, relaxed as never before from all earthly ties, he rejoiced in a heavenly sense of spiritual independence. It was an exquisite pleasure to him to know that there was no one in the world who was essential to his peace of mind. He had reached, though by a very different path, the immunity from the concerns of this world which is the aim of the ascetic. While, like the Buddha contemplating his navel, he was delectably immersed in his self-satisfaction, someone touched him on the shoulder. He looked up and saw Captain Nichols.

"I was passin' by and saw you sittin' there. I came up to say 'owd'ye-do to you.'"

"Sit down and have a drink."

"I don't mind if I do."

The skipper wore his shore-going clothes. They were not old, but they looked astonishingly seedy. He had two days' growth of beard on his lean face, and the nails on his hands were rimmed with grime. He looked down-at-heel.

"I'm 'avin' me teeth attended to," he said. "You was right. The dentist says I must 'ave 'em all out. Says 'e's not surprised I suffer from dyspepsia. It's a miracle I've gone on as long as I 'ave, according to 'im."

The doctor gave him a glance and noticed that his upper front teeth had been extracted. It made his ingratiating smile more sinister than ever.

"Where's Fred Blake?" asked Dr. Saunders.

The smile faded from the skipper's lips, but lingered sardonic in his eyes.

"Come to a sticky end, poor young chap," he replied.

"What d'you mean?"

"Fell overboard one night or jumped over. Nobody knows. He was gone in the morning."

"In a storm?"

The doctor could hardly believe his ears.

"No. Sea was as flat as a mill-pond. He was very low after we come away from Kanda. We went to Batavia same as we said we was goin' to do. I suspicioned 'e was expectin' a letter there. But if it come or if it didn't I don't know, and it's no good askin' me."

"But how could he go overboard without anyone noticing? What about the man at the helm?"

"We'd 'ove to for the night. Been drinkin' very 'eavy. Nothin' to do with me, of course, but I tell 'im he'd better go easy. Told me to mind me own bloody business. All right, I says, go your own way. It ain't goin' to disturb my night's rest what you do."

"When did it happen?"

"A week ago last Tuesday."

The doctor leaned back. It was a shock to him. It was so short a while since that boy and he had sat together and talked. It had seemed to him then that there was in him something naïve and aspiring that was not devoid of charm. It was not very pleasant to think of him now drifting, mangled and terrible, at the mercy of the tides. He was only a kid. Notwithstanding his philosophy, the doctor could not but feel a pang when the young died.

"Very awkward it was for me, too," continued the skipper. "He'd won nearly all my money at cribbage. We played a lot after we left you, and I tell you the luck 'e 'ad was unbelievable. I knew I was a better player than 'im; I'd never 'ave took him on if I 'adn't been as sure of that as I am that you're sittin' there, and I doubled the stakes. And d'you know, I couldn't win. I began to think there was somethin' phoney about it, but there's not much you can teach me in that direction, and I couldn't see 'ow it was done if it was done. No, it was just luck. Well, to cut a long story short, by the time we got to Batavia 'e'd took off me every penny I'd got for the cruise.

"Well, after the accident I broke open his strong box. We'd bought a couple when we was at Merauke. I 'ad to, you know, to see if there was an address or anythin' so as I could communicate with the sorrowin' relatives. I'm very particular about that sort of thing. And d'you know, there wasn't a shillin' there. It was as empty as the palm of my 'and. The dirty little tyke carried all 'is money in 'is belt and 'e gone overboard with it."

"It must have been a sell for you."

"I never liked him, not from the beginnin'. Crooked 'e was. And mind you, it was me own money, most of it. You can't tell me 'e could win like that playin' on the square. I don't know whatever I should 'ave done if I 'adn't been able to sell the ketch to a Chink at Penang. It looked like I was bein' made the goat."

The doctor stared. It was a queer story. He wondered if there was any truth in it. Captain Nichols filled him with repulsion.

"I suppose you didn't by any chance push him overboard when he was drunk?" he asked acidly.

"What d'you mean by that?"

"You didn't know the money was in his belt. It was quite a packet for a bum like you. I wouldn't put it past you to have done the dirty on the wretched boy."

Captain Nichols went green in the face. His jaw dropped and a glassy stare came into his eyes. The doctor chuckled. That random shot of his had gone home. The scoundrel. But then he saw that the skipper was not looking at him, but at something behind; he turned round and saw a woman slowly ascending the steps from the street to the terrace. She was a shortish woman and stout, with a flat, pasty face and somewhat protruding eyes. They were strangely round and shone like boot-buttons. She wore a dress of black cloth that was a little too tight for her, and on her

head a black straw hat, like a man's. She was most unsuitably dressed for the tropics. She looked hot and out of temper.

"My God!" gasped the skipper, under his breath. "My old woman."

She walked up to the table in a leisurely manner. She looked at the unhappy man with distaste in her eyes and he watched her in helpless fascination.

"What 'ave you done with your front teeth, Captain?" she said.

He smiled ingratiatingly.

"Whoever thought of seein' you, my dear?" he said. "This is a joyful surprise."

"We'll go and 'ave a cup of tea, Captain."

"Just as you say, my dear."

He got up. She turned round and walked the way she came. Captain Nichols followed her. His face wore a very serious expression. The doctor reflected that now he would never know the truth about poor Fred Blake. He smiled grimly as he saw the skipper walk in silence down the street by his wife's side.

A faint breeze rustled suddenly the leaves of the trees and a ray of sun found its way through them and danced for a moment by his side. He thought of Louise and her ash-blond hair. She was like an enchantress in an old tale whom men loved to their destruction. She was an enigmatic figure going about her household duties with that steady composure and with serenity waiting for what would in due course befall her. He wondered what it would be. He sighed a little, for, whatever it was, if the richest dreams the imagination offered came true, in the end it remained nothing but illusion.

THE PAINTED VEIL

“ . . . the painted veil which those who live call Life.”

The Painted Veil

CHAPTER I

SHE gave a startled cry.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Notwithstanding the darkness of the shuttered room he saw her face on a sudden distraught with terror.

"Someone just tried the door."

"Well, perhaps it was the amah, or one of the boys."

"They never come at this time. They know I always sleep after tiffin."

"Who else could it be?"

"Walter," she whispered, her lips trembling.

She pointed to his shoes. He tried to put them on, but his nervousness, for her alarm was affecting him, made him clumsy, and besides, they were on the tight side. With a faint gasp of impatience she gave him a shoe-horn. She slipped into a kimono and in her bare feet went over to her dressing-table. Her hair was shingled and with a comb she had repaired its disorder before he had laced his second shoe. She handed him his coat.

"How shall I get out?"

"You'd better wait a bit. I'll look out and see that it's all right."

"It can't possibly be Walter. He doesn't leave the laboratory till five."

"Who is it, then?"

They spoke in whispers now. She was quaking. It occurred to him that in an emergency she would lose her head and on a sudden he felt angry with her. If it wasn't safe why the devil had she said it was? She caught her breath and put her hand on his arm. He followed the direction of her glance. They stood facing the windows that led out on the veranda. They were shuttered and the shutters were bolted. They saw the white china knob of the handle slowly turn. They had heard no one walk along the veranda. It was terrifying to see that silent motion. A minute passed and there was no sound. Then, with the ghastliness of the supernatural, in the same stealthy, noiseless and horrifying

manner, they saw the white china knob of the handle at the other window turn also. It was so frightening that Kitty, her nerves failing her, opened her mouth to scream; but, seeing what she was going to do, he swiftly put his hand over it and her cry was smothered in his fingers.

Silence. She leaned against him, her knees shaking, and he was afraid she would faint. Frowning, his jaw set, he carried her to the bed and sat her down upon it. She was as white as the sheet and notwithstanding his tan his cheeks were pale too. He stood by her side looking with fascinated gaze at the china knob. They did not speak. Then he saw that she was crying.

"For God's sake don't do that," he whispered irritably. "If we're in for it we're in for it. We shall just have to brazen it out."

She looked for her handkerchief and knowing what she wanted he gave her her bag.

"Where's your topi?"

"I left it downstairs."

"Oh, my God!"

"I say, you must pull yourself together. It's a hundred to one it wasn't Walter. Why on earth should he come back at this hour? He never does come home in the middle of the day, does he?"

"Never."

"I'll bet you anything you like it was the amah."

She gave him the shadow of a smile. His rich, caressing voice reassured her and she took his hand and affectionately pressed it. He gave her a moment to collect herself.

"Look here, we can't stay here for ever," he said then. "Do you feel up to going out on the veranda and having a look?"

"I don't think I can stand."

"Have you got any brandy in here?"

She shook her head. A frown for an instant darkened his brow, he was growing impatient, he did not quite know what to do. Suddenly she clutched his hand more tightly.

"Suppose he's waiting there?"

He forced his lips to smile and his voice retained the gentle, persuasive tone the effect of which he was so fully conscious of.

"That's not very likely. Have a little pluck, Kitty. How can it possibly be your husband? If he'd come in and seen a strange topi in the hall and come upstairs and found your room locked, surely he would have made some sort of row. It must have been

one of the servants. Only a Chinese would turn a handle in that way."

She did feel more herself now.

"It's not very pleasant even if it was only the amah."

"She can be squared and if necessary I'll put the fear of God into her. There are not many advantages in being a Government official, but you may as well get what you can out of it."

He must be right. She stood up and turning to him stretched out her arms: he took her in his and kissed her on the lips. It was such rapture that it was pain. She adored him. He released her and she went to the window. She slid back the bolt and opening the shutter a little looked out. There was not a soul. She slipped on to the veranda, looked into her husband's dressing-room and then into her own sitting-room. Both were empty. She went back to the bedroom and beckoned to him.

"Nobody."

"I believe the whole thing was an optical delusion."

"Don't laugh. I was terrified. Go into my sitting-room and sit down. I'll put on my stockings and some shoes."

CHAPTER II

HE did as she bade and in five minutes she joined him. He was smoking a cigarette.

"I say, could I have a brandy and soda?"

"Yes, I'll ring."

"I don't think it would hurt you by the look of things."

They waited in silence for the boy to answer. She gave the order.

"Ring up the laboratory and ask if Walter is there," she said then. "They won't know your voice."

He took up the receiver and asked for the number. He enquired whether Dr. Fane was in. He put down the receiver.

"He hasn't been in since tiffin," he told her. "Ask the boy whether he has been here."

"I daren't. It'll look so funny if he has and I didn't see him."

The boy brought the drinks and Townsend helped himself. When he offered her some she shook her head.

"What's to be done if it was Walter?" she asked.

"Perhaps he wouldn't care."

"Walter?"

Her tone was incredulous.

"It's always struck me he was rather shy. Some men can't bear scenes, you know. He's got sense enough to know that there's nothing to be gained by making a scandal. I don't believe for a minute it was Walter, but even if it was, my impression is that he'll do nothing. I think he'll ignore it."

She reflected for a moment.

"He's awfully in love with me."

"Well, that's all to the good. You'll get round him."

He gave her that charming smile of his which she had always found so irresistible. It was a slow smile which started in his clear blue eyes and travelled by perceptible degrees to his shapely mouth. He had small, white, even teeth. It was a very sensual smile and it made her heart melt in her body.

"I don't very much care," she said, with a flash of gaiety. "It was worth it."

"It was my fault."

"Why did you come? I was amazed to see you."

"I couldn't resist it."

"You dear."

She leaned a little towards him, her dark and shining eyes gazing passionately into his, her mouth a little open with desire, and he put his arms round her. She abandoned herself with a sigh of ecstasy to their shelter.

"You know you can always count on me," he said.

"I'm so happy with you. I wish I could make you as happy as you make me."

"You're not frightened any more?"

"I hate Walter," she answered.

He did not quite know what to say to this, so he kissed her. Her face was very soft against his.

But he took her wrist on which was a little gold watch and looked at the time.

"Do you know what I must do now?"

"Bolt?" she smiled.

He nodded. For one instant she clung to him more closely, but she felt his desire to go, and she released him.

"It's shameful the way you neglect your work. Be off with you."

He could never resist the temptation to flirt.

"You seem in a devil of a hurry to get rid of me," he said lightly.

"You know that I hate to let you go."

Her answer was low and deep and serious. He gave a flattered laugh.

"Don't worry your pretty little head about our mysterious visitor. I'm quite sure it was the amah. And if there's any trouble I guarantee to get you out of it."

"Have you had a lot of experience?"

His smile was amused and complacent.

"No, but I flatter myself that I've got a head screwed on my shoulders."

CHAPTER III

SHE went out on to the veranda and watched him leave the house. He waved his hand to her. It gave her a little thrill as she looked at him; he was forty-one, but he had the lithe figure and the springing step of a boy.

The veranda was in shadow; and lazily, her heart at ease with satisfied love, she lingered. Their house stood in the Happy Valley, on the side of the hill, for they could not afford to live on the more eligible but expensive Peak. But her abstracted gaze scarcely noticed the blue sea and the crowded shipping in the harbour. She could think only of her lover.

Of course it was stupid to behave as they had done that afternoon, but if he wanted her how could she be prudent? He had come two or three times after tiffin, when in the heat of the day no one thought of stirring out, and not even the boys had seen him come and go. It was very difficult at Hong-Kong. She hated the Chinese city and it made her nervous to go into the filthy little house off the Victoria Road in which they were in the habit of meeting. It was a curio dealer's, and the Chinese who were sitting about stared at her unpleasantly; she hated the ingratiating smile of the old man who took her to the back of the shop and then up a dark flight of stairs. The room into which he led her was frowsy and the large wooden bed against the wall made her shudder.

"This is dreadfully sordid, isn't it?" she said to Charlie the first time she met him there.

"It was till you came in," he answered.

Of course the moment he took her in his arms she forgot everything.

Oh, how hateful it was that she wasn't free, that they both weren't free! She didn't like his wife. Kitty's wandering thoughts dwelt now for a moment on Dorothy Townsend. How unfortunate to be called Dorothy! It dated you. She was thirty-eight at least. But Charlie never spoke of her. Of course he didn't care for her; she bored him to death. But he was a gentleman. Kitty smiled with affectionate irony: it was just like him, silly old thing; he might be unfaithful to her, but he would never allow a word in disparagement of her to cross his lips. She was a tallish woman, taller than Kitty, neither stout nor thin, with a good deal of pale brown hair; she could never have been pretty with anything but the prettiness of youth; her features were good enough without being remarkable and her blue eyes were cold. She had a skin that you would never look at twice and no colour in her cheeks. And she dressed like—well, like what she was, the wife of the Assistant Colonial Secretary at Hong-Kong. Kitty smiled and gave her shoulders a faint shrug.

Of course no one could deny that Dorothy Townsend had a pleasant voice. She was a wonderful mother, Charlie always said that of her, and she was what Kitty's mother called a gentlewoman. But Kitty did not like her. She did not like her casual manner; and the politeness with which she treated you when you went there, to tea or dinner, was exasperating because you could not but feel how little interest she took in you. The fact was, Kitty supposed, that she cared for nothing but her children: there were two boys at school in England, and another boy of six whom she was going to take home next year. Her face was a mask. She smiled and in her pleasant, well-mannered way said the things that were expected of her; but for all her cordiality held you at a distance. She had a few intimate friends in the Colony and they greatly admired her. Kitty wondered whether Mrs. Townsend thought her a little common. She flushed. After all there was no reason for her to put on airs. It was true that her father had been a Colonial Governor and of course it was very grand while it lasted—everyone stood up when you entered a room and men took off their hats to you as you passed in your car—but what could be more insignificant than a Colonial Governor when he had retired? Dorothy Townsend's father lived on a pension in a small

house at Earl's Court. Kitty's mother would think it a dreadful bore if she asked her to call. Kitty's father, Bernard Garstin, was a K.C. and there was no reason why he should not be made a judge one of these days. Anyhow they lived in South Kensington.

CHAPTER IV

KITTY, coming to Hong-Kong on her marriage, had found it hard to reconcile herself to the fact that her social position was determined by her husband's occupation. Of course everyone had been very kind and for two or three months they had gone out to parties almost every night; when they dined at Government House the Governor took her in as a bride; but she had understood quickly that as the wife of the Government bacteriologist she was of no particular consequence. It made her angry.

"It's too absurd," she told her husband. "Why, there's hardly anyone here that one would bother about for five minutes at home. Mother wouldn't dream of asking any of them to dine at our house.

"You mustn't let it worry you," he answered. "It doesn't really matter, you know."

"Of course it doesn't matter, it only shows how stupid they are, but it is rather funny when you think of all the people who used to come to our house at home that here we should be treated like dirt."

"From a social standpoint the man of science does not exist," he smiled.

She knew that now, but she had not known it when she married him.

"I don't know that it exactly amuses me to be taken in to dinner by the agent of the P. and O.," she said, laughing in order that what she said might not seem snobbish.

Perhaps he saw the reproach behind her lightness of manner, for he took her hand and shyly pressed it.

"I'm awfully sorry, Kitty dear, but don't let it vex you."

"Oh, I'm not going to let it do that."

CHAPTER V

It couldn't have been Walter that afternoon. It must have been one of the servants and after all they didn't matter. Chinese servants knew everything anyway. But they held their tongues.

Her heart beat a little faster as she remembered the way in which that white china knob slowly turned. They mustn't take risks like that again. It was better to go to the curio shop. No one who saw her go in would think anything of it, and they were absolutely safe there. The owner of the shop knew who Charlie was and he was not such a fool as to put up the back of the Assistant Colonial Secretary. What did anything matter really but that Charlie loved her?

She turned away from the veranda and went back into her sitting-room. She threw herself down on the sofa and stretched out her hand to get a cigarette. Her eye caught sight of a note lying on the top of a book. She opened it. It was written in pencil.

Dear Kitty,

Here is the book you wanted. I was just going to send it when I met Dr. Fane and he said he'd bring it round himself as he was passing the house.

V.H.

She rang the bell and when the boy came asked him who had brought the book and when.

"Master bring it, missy, after tiffin," he answered.

Then it had been Walter. She rang up the Colonial Secretary's Office at once and asked for Charlie. She told him what she had just learned. There was a pause before he answered.

"What shall I do?" she asked.

"I'm in the middle of an important consultation. I'm afraid I can't talk to you now. My advice to you is to sit tight."

She put down the receiver. She understood that he was not alone and she was impatient with his business.

She sat down again, at a desk, and resting her face in her hands sought to think out the situation. Of course Walter might merely have thought she was sleeping: there was no reason why she should not lock herself in. She tried to remember if they had been talking. Certainly they had not been talking loud. And there was the hat.

It was maddening of Charlie to have left it downstairs. But it was no use blaming him for that, it was natural enough, and there was nothing to tell that Walter had noticed it. He was probably in a hurry and had just left the book and note on his way to some appointment connected with his work. The strange thing was that he should have tried the door and then the two windows. If he thought she was asleep it was unlike him to disturb her. What a fool she had been!

She shook herself a little and again she felt that sweet pain in her heart which she always felt when she thought of Charlie. It had been worth it. He had said that he would stand by her, and if the worse came to the worse, well . . . Let Walter kick up a row if he chose. She had Charlie; what did she care? Perhaps it would be the best thing for him to know. She had never cared for Walter and since she had loved Charlie Townsend it had irked and bored her to submit to her husband's caresses. She wanted to have nothing more to do with him. She didn't see how he could prove anything. If he accused her she would deny, and if it came to a pass that she could deny no longer, well, she would fling the truth in his teeth, and he could do what he chose.

CHAPTER VI

WITHIN three months of her marriage she knew that she had made a mistake; but it had been her mother's fault even more than hers.

There was a photograph of her mother in the room and Kitty's harassed eyes fell on it. She did not know why she kept it there, for she was not very fond of her mother; there was one of her father too, but that was downstairs on the grand piano. It had been done when he took silk and it represented him in a wig and gown. Even they could not make him imposing; he was a little, wizened man, with tired eyes, a long upper lip, and a thin mouth; a facetious photographer had told him to look pleasant, but he had succeeded only in looking severe. It was on this account, for as a rule the down-turned corners of his mouth and the dejection of his eyes gave him an air of mild depression, that Mrs. Garstin, thinking it made him look judicial, had chosen it from among the proofs. But her own photograph showed her in the dress in

which she had gone to Court when her husband was made a King's Counsel. She was very grand in the velvet gown, the long train so disposed as to show to advantage, with feathers in her hair and flowers in her hand. She held herself erect. She was a woman of fifty, thin and flat-chested, with prominent cheek-bones and a large, well-shaped nose. She had a great quantity of very smooth black hair and Kitty had always suspected that, if not dyed, it was at least touched up. Her fine black eyes were never still and this was the most noticeable thing about her; for when she was talking to you it was disconcerting to see those restless eyes in that impassive, unlined and yellow face. They moved from one part of you to another, to other persons in the room, and then back to you; you felt that she was criticising you, summing you up, watchful meanwhile of all that went on around her, and that the words she spoke had no connection with her thoughts.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. GARSTIN was a hard, cruel, managing, ambitious, parsimonious and stupid woman. She was the daughter, one of five, of a solicitor in Liverpool and Bernard Garstin had met her when he was on the Northern Circuit. He had seemed then a young man of promise and her father said he would go far. He hadn't. He was painstaking, industrious and capable, but he had not the will to advance himself. Mrs. Garstin despised him. But she recognised, though with bitterness, that she could only achieve success through him, and she set herself to drive him on the way she desired to go. She nagged him without mercy. She discovered that if she wanted him to do something which his sensitiveness revolted against she had only to give him no peace and eventually, exhausted, he would yield. On her side she set herself to cultivate the people who might be useful. She flattered the solicitors who would send her husband briefs and was familiar with their wives. She was obsequious to the judges and their ladies. She made much of promising politicians.

In twenty-five years Mrs. Garstin never invited anyone to dine at her house because she liked him. She gave large dinner parties at regular intervals. But parsimony was as strong in her as ambition. She hated to spend money. She flattered herself that

she could make as much show as anyone else at half the price. Her dinners were long and elaborate, but thrifty, and she could never persuade herself that people when they were eating and talking knew what they drank. She wrapped sparkling Moselle in a napkin and thought her guests took it for champagne.

Bernard Garstin had a fair, though not a large, practice. Men who had been called after him had long outstripped him. Mrs. Garstin made him stand for Parliament. The expense of the election was borne by the party, but here again her parsimony balked her ambition, and she could not bring herself to spend enough money to nurse the constituency. The subscriptions Bernard Garstin made to the innumerable funds a candidate is expected to contribute to were always just a little less than adequate. He was beaten. Though it would have pleased Mrs. Garstin to be a Member's wife she bore her disappointment with fortitude. The fact of her husband's standing had brought her in contact with a number of prominent persons and she appreciated the addition to her social consequence. She knew that Bernard would never make his mark in the House. She wanted him to be a Member only that he might have a claim on the gratitude of his party and surely to fight two or three losing seats would give him that.

But he was still a junior and many younger men than he had already taken silk. It was necessary that he should too, not only because otherwise he could scarcely hope to be made a judge, but on her account also; it mortified her to go in to dinner after women ten years younger than herself. But here she encountered in her husband an obstinacy which she had not for years been accustomed to. He was afraid that as a K.C. he would get no work. A bird in the hand was worth two in the bush, he told her, to which she retorted that a proverb was the last refuge of the mentally destitute. He suggested to her the possibility that his income would be halved and he knew that there was no argument which could have greater weight with her. She would not listen. She called him pusillanimous. She gave him no peace and at last, as always, he yielded. He applied for silk and it was promptly awarded him.

His misgivings were justified. He made no headway as a leader and his briefs were few. But he concealed any disappointment he may have felt, and if he reproached his wife it was in his heart. He grew perhaps a little more silent, but he had always been silent

at home, and no one in his family noticed a change in him. His daughters had never looked upon him as anything but a source of income; it had always seemed perfectly natural that he should lead a dog's life in order to provide them with board and lodging, clothes, holidays and money for odds and ends; and now, understanding that through his fault money was less plentiful, the indifference they had felt for him was tinged with an exasperated contempt. It never occurred to them to ask themselves what were the feelings of the subdued little man who went out early in the morning and came home at night only in time to dress for dinner. He was a stranger to them, but because he was their father they took it for granted that he should love and cherish them.

CHAPTER VIII

BUT there was a quality of courage in Mrs. Garstin which in itself was admirable. She let no one in her immediate circle, which to her was the world, see how mortified she was by the frustration of her hopes. She made no change in her style of living. By careful management she was able to give as showy dinners as she had done before, and she met her friends with the same bright gaiety which she had so long cultivated. She had a hard and facile fund of chit-chat which in the society she moved in passed for conversation. She was a useful guest among persons to whom small talk did not come easily, for she was never at a loss with a new topic and could be trusted immediately to break an awkward silence with a suitable observation.

It was unlikely now that Bernard Garstin would ever be made a judge of the High Court, but he might still hope for a County Court judgeship or at the worst an appointment in the Colonies. Meanwhile she had the satisfaction of seeing him appointed Recorder of a Welsh town. But it was on her daughters that she set her hopes. By arranging good marriages for them she expected to make up for all the disappointments of her career. There were two, Kitty and Doris. Doris gave no sign of good looks, her nose was too long and her figure was lumpy; so that Mrs. Garstin could hope no more for her than that she should marry a young man who was well off in a suitable profession.

But Kitty was a beauty. She gave promise of being so when she

was still a child, for she had large, dark eyes, liquid and vivacious, brown, curling hair in which there was a reddish tint, exquisite teeth and a lovely skin. Her features would never be very good, for her chin was too square and her nose, though not so long as Doris's, too big. Her beauty depended a good deal on her youth, and Mrs. Garstin realised that she must marry in the first flush of her maidenhood. When she came out she was dazzling: her skin was still her greatest beauty, but her eyes with their long lashes were so starry and yet so melting that it gave you a catch at the heart to look into them. She had a charming gaiety and the desire to please. Mrs. Garstin bestowed upon her all the affection, a harsh, competent, calculating affection, of which she was capable; she dreamed ambitious dreams; it was not a good marriage she aimed at for her daughter, but a brilliant one.

Kitty had been brought up with the knowledge that she was going to be a beautiful woman and she more than suspected her mother's ambition. It accorded with her own desires. She was launched upon the world and Mrs. Garstin performed prodigies in getting herself invited to dances where her daughter might meet eligible men. Kitty was a success. She was amusing as well as beautiful, and very soon she had a dozen men in love with her. But none was suitable, and Kitty, charming and friendly with all, took care to commit herself with none. The drawing-room in South Kensington was filled on Sunday afternoons with amorous youth, but Mrs. Garstin observed, with a grim smile of approval, that it needed no effort on her part to keep them at a distance from Kitty. Kitty was prepared to flirt with them, and it diverted her to play one off against the other, but when they proposed to her, as none failed to do, she refused them with tact but decision.

Her first season passed without the perfect suitor presenting himself, and the second also; but she was young and could afford to wait. Mrs. Garstin told her friends that she thought it a pity for a girl to marry till she was twenty-one. But a third year passed and then a fourth. Two or three of her old admirers proposed again, but they were still penniless; one or two boys younger than herself proposed; a retired Indian Civilian, a K.C.I.E., did the same: he was fifty-three. Kitty still danced a great deal, she went to Wimbledon and Lord's, to Ascot and Henley; she was thoroughly enjoying herself; but still no one whose position and income were satisfactory asked her to marry him. Mrs. Garstin began to grow uneasy. She noticed that Kitty was beginning to attract men of

forty and over. She reminded her that she would not be any longer so pretty in a year or two and that young girls were coming out all the time. Mrs. Garstin did not mince her words in the domestic circle and she warned her daughter tartly that she would miss her market.

Kitty shrugged her shoulders. She thought herself as pretty as ever, prettier perhaps, for she had learnt how to dress in the last four years, and she had plenty of time. If she wanted to marry just to be married there were a dozen boys who would jump at the chance. Surely the right man would come along sooner or later. But Mrs. Garstin judged the situation more shrewdly: with anger in her heart for the beautiful daughter who had missed her chances she set her standard a little lower. She turned back to the professional class at which she had sneered in her pride and looked about for a young lawyer or a business man whose future inspired her with confidence.

Kitty reached the age of twenty-five and was still unmarried. Mrs. Garstin was exasperated and she did not hesitate often to give Kitty a piece of her very unpleasant mind. She asked her how much longer she expected her father to support her. He had spent sums he could ill afford in order to give her a chance and she had not taken it. It never struck Mrs. Garstin that perhaps her own hard affability had frightened the men, sons of wealthy fathers or heirs to a title, whose visits she had too cordially encouraged. She put down Kitty's failure to stupidity. Then Doris came out. She had a long nose still, and a poor figure, and she danced badly. In her first season she became engaged to Geoffrey Dennison. He was the only son of a prosperous surgeon who had been given a baronetcy during the war. Geoffrey would inherit a title—it is not very grand to be a medical baronet, but a title, thank God, is still a title—and a very comfortable fortune.

Kitty in a panic married Walter Fane.

CHAPTER IX

SHE had known him but a little while and had never taken much notice of him. She had no idea when or where they had first met till after their engagement he told her that it was at a dance to which some friends had brought him. She certainly paid no

attention to him then and if she danced with him it was because she was good-natured and was glad to dance with anyone who asked her. 'She didn't know him from Adam when a day or two later at another dance he came up and spoke to her. Then she remarked that he was at every dance she went to.

"You know, I've danced with you at least a dozen times now and you must tell me your name," she said to him at last in her laughing way.

He was obviously taken aback.

"Do you mean to say you don't know it? I was introduced to you."

"Oh, but people always mumble. I shouldn't be at all surprised if you hadn't the ghost of an idea what mine was."

He smiled at her. His face was grave and a trifle stern, but his smile was very sweet.

"Of course I know it." He was silent for a moment or two. "Have you no curiosity?" he asked then.

"As much as most women."

"It didn't occur to you to ask somebody or other what my name was?"

She was faintly amused; she wondered why he thought it could in the least interest her; but she liked to please, so she looked at him with that dazzling smile of hers and her beautiful eyes, dewy ponds under forest trees, held an enchanting kindness.

"Well, what is it?"

"Walter Fane."

She did not know why he came to dances; he did not dance very well, and he seemed to know few people. She had a passing thought that he was in love with her; but she dismissed it with a shrug of the shoulders: she had known girls who thought every man they met was in love with them and had always found them absurd. But she gave Walter Fane just a little more of her attention. He certainly did not behave like any of the other youths who had been in love with her. Most of them told her so frankly and wanted to kiss her: a good many did. But Walter Fane never talked of her and very little of himself. He was rather silent; she did not mind that because she had plenty to say and it pleased her to see him laugh when she made a facetious remark; but when he talked it was not stupidly. He was evidently shy. It appeared that he lived in the East and was home on leave.

One Sunday afternoon he appeared at their house in South

Kensington. There were a dozen people there, and he sat for some time, somewhat ill at ease, and then went away. Her mother asked her later who he was.

"I haven't a notion. Did you ask him to come here?"

"Yes, I met him at the Baddeleys'. He said he'd seen you at various dances. I said I was always at home on Sundays."

"His name is Fane and he's got some sort of job in the East."

"Yes, he's a doctor. Is he in love with you?"

"Upon my word, I don't know."

"I should have thought you knew by now when a young man was in love with you."

"I wouldn't marry him if he were," said Kitty lightly.

Mrs. Garstin did not answer. Her silence was heavy with displeasure. Kitty flushed: she knew that her mother did not care now whom she married so long as somehow she got her off her hands.

CHAPTER X

DURING the next week she met him at three dances and now, his shyness perhaps wearing off a little, he was somewhat more communicative. He was a doctor, certainly, but he did not practise; he was a bacteriologist (Kitty had only a very vague idea what that meant) and he had a job at Hong-Kong. He was going back in the autumn. He talked a good deal about China. She made it a practice to appear interested in whatever people talked to her of, but indeed the life in Hong-Kong sounded quite jolly; there were clubs and tennis and racing and polo and golf.

"Do people dance much there?"

"Oh yes, I think so."

She wondered whether he told her these things with a motive. He seemed to like her society, but never by a pressure of the hand, by a glance or by a word, did he give the smallest indication that he looked upon her as anything but a girl whom you met and danced with. On the following Sunday he came again to their house. Her father happened to come in—it was raining and he had not been able to play golf—and he and Walter Fane had a long chat. She asked her father afterwards what they had talked of.

"It appears he's stationed at Hong-Kong. The Chief Justice is an

old friend of mine at the Bar. He seems an unusually intelligent young man."

She knew that her father was as a rule bored to death by the young people whom for her sake and now her sister's he had been forced for years to entertain.

"It's not often you like any of my young men, Father," she said.

His kind, tired eyes rested upon her.

"Are you going to marry him by any chance?"

"Certainly not."

"Is he in love with you?"

"He shows no sign of it."

"Do you like him?"

"I don't think I do very much. He irritates me a little."

He was not her type at all. He was short, but not thick-set, slight rather and thin; dark and clean-shaven, with very regular, clean-cut features. His eyes were almost black, but not large, they were not very mobile and they rested on objects with a singular persistence; they were curious, but not very pleasant eyes. With his straight, delicate nose, his fine brow and well-shaped mouth he ought to have been good-looking. But surprisingly enough he was not. When Kitty began to think of him at all she was surprised that he should have such good features when you took them one by one. His expression was slightly sarcastic and now that Kitty knew him better she realised that she was not quite at ease with him. He had no gaiety.

By the time the season drew to its end they had seen a good deal of one another, but he had remained as aloof and impenetrable as ever. He was not exactly shy with her, but embarrassed; his conversation remained strangely impersonal. Kitty came to the conclusion that he was not in the least in love with her. He liked her and found her easy to talk to, but when he returned to China in November he would not think of her again. She thought it not impossible that he was engaged all the time to some nurse in a hospital at Hong-Kong, the daughter of a clergyman, dull, plain, flat-footed and strenuous; that was the wife that would exactly suit him.

Then came the announcement of Doris's engagement to Geoffrey Dennison. Doris, at eighteen, was making quite a suitable marriage, and she was twenty-five and single. Supposing she did not marry at all? That season the only person who had

proposed to her was a boy of twenty who was still at Oxford: she couldn't marry a boy five years younger than herself. She had made a hash of things. Last year she had refused a widowed Knight of the Bath with three children. She almost wished she hadn't. Mother would be horrible now, and Doris—Doris who had always been sacrificed because she, Kitty, was expected to make the brilliant match—would not fail to crow over her. Kitty's heart sank.

CHAPTER XI

BUT one afternoon when she was walking home from Harrod's she chanced to meet Walter Fane in the Brompton Road. He stopped and talked to her. Then, casually, he asked her if she would take a turn with him in the Park. She had no particular wish to go home; it was not just then a very agreeable place. They strolled along, talking as they always talked, of casual things, and he asked her where she was going for the summer.

"Oh, we always bury ourselves in the country. You see, Father is exhausted after the term's work and we just go to the quietest place we can find."

Kitty spoke with her tongue in her cheek, for she knew quite well that her father had not nearly enough work to tire him and, even if he had, his convenience would never have been consulted in the choice of a holiday. But a quiet place was a cheap place.

"Don't you think those chairs look rather inviting?" said Walter suddenly.

She followed his eyes and saw two green chairs by themselves under a tree on the grass.

"Let us sit in them," she said.

But when they were seated he seemed to grow strangely abstracted. He was an odd creature. She chattered on, however, gaily enough and wondered why he had asked her to walk with him in the Park. Perhaps he was going to confide in her his passion for the flat-footed nurse in Hong-Kong. Suddenly he turned to her, interrupting her in the middle of a sentence, so that she could not but see that he had not been listening, and his face was chalk-white.

"I want to say something to you."

She looked at him quickly and she saw that his eyes were filled

with a painful anxiety. His voice was strained, low and not quite steady. But before she could ask herself what this agitation meant he spoke again.

"I want to ask you if you'll marry me."

"You could knock me down with a feather," she answered, so surprised that she looked at him blankly.

"Didn't you know I was awfully in love with you?"

"You never showed it."

"I'm very awkward and clumsy. I always find it more difficult to say the things I mean than the things I don't."

Her heart began to beat a little more quickly. She had been proposed to often before, but gaily or sentimentally, and she had answered in the same fashion. No one had ever asked her to marry him in a manner which was so abrupt and yet strangely tragic.

"It's very kind of you," she said, doubtfully.

"I fell in love with you the first time I saw you. I wanted to ask you before, but I could never bring myself to it."

"I'm not sure if that's very well put," she chuckled.

She was glad to have an opportunity to laugh a little, for on that fine, sunny day the air about them seemed on a sudden heavy with foreboding. He frowned darkly.

"Oh, you know what I mean. I didn't want to lose hope. But now you're going away and in the autumn I have to go back to China."

"I've never thought of you in that way," she said helplessly.

He said nothing more. He looked down on the grass sullenly. He was a very odd creature. But now that he had told her she felt in some mysterious way that his love was something she had never met before. She was a little frightened, but she was elated also. His impassivity was vaguely impressive.

"You must give me time to think."

Still he did not say anything. He did not stir. Did he mean to keep her there till she had decided? That was absurd. She must talk it over with her mother. She ought to have got up when she spoke, she had waited thinking he would answer, and now, she did not know why, she found it difficult to make a movement. She did not look at him, but she was conscious of his appearance; she had never seen herself marrying a man so little taller than herself. When you sat close to him you saw how good his features were, and how cold his face. It was strange when you

couldn't help being conscious of the devastating passion which was in his heart.

"I don't know you, I don't know you at all," she said tremulously.

He gave her a look and she felt her eyes drawn to his. They had a tenderness which she had never seen in them before, but there was something beseeching in them, like a dog's that has been whipped, which slightly exasperated her.

"I think I improve on acquaintance," he said.

"Of course you're shy, aren't you?"

It was certainly the oddest proposal she had ever had. And even now it seemed to her that they were saying to one another the last things you would have expected on such an occasion. She was not in the least in love with him. She did not know why she hesitated to refuse him at once.

"I'm awfully stupid," he said, "I want to tell you that I love you more than anything in the world, but I find it so awfully difficult to say."

Now that was odd too, for inexplicably enough it touched her; he wasn't really cold, of course, it was his manner that was unfortunate: she liked him at that moment better than she had ever liked him before. Doris was to be married in November. He would be on his way to China then and if she married him she would be with him. It wouldn't be very nice to be a bridesmaid at Doris's wedding. She would be glad to escape that. And then Doris as a married woman and herself single! Everyone knew how young Doris was and it would make her seem older. It would put her on the shelf. It wouldn't be a very good marriage for her, but it was a marriage, and the fact that she would live in China made it easier. She was afraid of her mother's bitter tongue. Why, all the girls who had come out with her were married long ago and most of them had children; she was tired of going to see them and gushing over their babies. Walter Fane offered her a new life. She turned to him with a smile which she well knew the effect of.

"If I were so rash as to say I'd marry you, when would you want to marry me?"

He gave a sudden gasp of delight, and his white cheeks flushed.

"Now. At once. As soon as possible. We'd go to Italy for our honeymoon. August and September."

That would save her from spending the summer in a country

vicarage, hired at five guineas a week, with her father and mother. In a flash she saw in her mind's eye the announcement in the *Morning Post* that, the bridegroom having to return to the East, the wedding would take place at once. She knew her mother well enough, she could be counted on to make a splash; for the moment at least Doris would be in the background and when Doris's much grander wedding took place she would be far away.

She stretched out her hand.

"I think I like you very much. You must give me time to get used to you."

"Then it's yes?" he interrupted.

"I suppose so."

CHAPTER XII

SHE knew him very little then, and now, though they had been married for nearly two years, she knew him but little more. At first she had been touched by his kindness and flattered, though surprised, by his passion. He was extremely considerate; he was very attentive to her comfort; she never expressed the slightest wish without his hastening to gratify it. He was constantly giving her little presents. When she happened to feel ill no one could have been kinder or more thoughtful. She seemed to do him a favour when she gave him the opportunity of doing something tiresome for her. And he was always exceedingly polite. He rose to his feet when she entered a room, he gave her his hand to help her out of a car, if he chanced to meet her in the street he took off his hat, he was solicitous to open the door for her when she left a room, he never came into her bedroom or her boudoir without a knock. He treated her not as Kitty had seen most men treat their wives, but as though she were a fellow-guest in a country house. It was pleasing and yet a trifle comic. She would have felt more at home with him if he had been more casual. Nor did their conjugal relations draw her closer to him. He was passionate then, fierce, oddly hysterical too, and sentimental.

It disconcerted her to realise how emotional he really was. His self-control was due to shyness or to long training, she did not know which; it seemed to her faintly contemptible that when she lay in his arms, his desire appeased, he who was so timid of saying

absurd things, who so feared to be ridiculous, should use baby talk. She had offended him bitterly once by laughing and telling him that he was talking the most fearful slush. She had felt his arms grow limp about her, he remained quite silent for a little while, and then without a word released her and went into his own room. She didn't want to hurt his feelings and a day or two later she said to him:

"You silly old thing, I don't mind what nonsense you talk to me."

He had laughed in a shamefaced way. She had discovered very soon that he had an unhappy disability to lose himself. He was self-conscious. When there was a party and everyone started singing Walter could never bring himself to join in. He sat there smiling to show that he was pleased and amused, but his smile was forced; it was more like a sarcastic smirk, and you could not help feeling that he thought all those people enjoying themselves a pack of fools. He could not bring himself to play the round games which Kitty with her high spirits found such a lark. On their journey out to China he had absolutely refused to put on fancy dress when everyone else was wearing it. It disturbed her pleasure that he should so obviously think the whole thing a bore.

Kitty was lively; she was willing to chatter all day long and she laughed easily. His silence disconcerted her. He had a way which exasperated her of returning no answer to some casual remark of hers. It was true that it needed no answer, but an answer all the same would have been pleasant. If it was raining and she said: "It's raining cats and dogs," she would have liked him to say: "Yes, isn't it?" He remained silent. Sometimes she would have liked to shake him.

"I said it was raining cats and dogs," she repeated.

"I heard you," he answered, with his affectionate smile.

It showed that he had not meant to be offensive. He did not speak because he had nothing to say. But if nobody spoke unless he had something to say, Kitty reflected, with a smile, the human race would very soon lose the use of speech.

CHAPTER XIII

THE fact was, of course, that he had no charm. That was why he was not popular, and she had not been long in Hong-Kong before she discovered that he was not. She remained very vague about his work. It was enough for her to realise, and she did this quite distinctly, that to be the Government bacteriologist was no great fry. He seemed to have no desire to discuss that part of his life with her. Because she was willing to be interested in anything, at first she had asked him about it. He put her off with a jest.

"It's very dull and technical," he said on another occasion. "And it's grossly underpaid."

He was very reserved. All she knew about his antecedents, his birth, his education, and his life before he met her, she had elicited by direct questioning. It was odd, the only thing that seemed to annoy him was a question; and when, in her natural curiosity, she fired a string of them at him, his answers became at every one more abrupt. She had the wit to see that he did not care to reply because he had anything to hide from her, but merely from a natural secretiveness. It bored him to talk about himself. It made him shy and uncomfortable. He did not know how to be open. He was fond of reading, but he read books which seemed to Kitty very dull. If he was not busy with some scientific treatise he would read books about China or historical works. He never relaxed. She did not think he could. He was fond of games: he played tennis and bridge.

She wondered why he had ever fallen in love with her. She could not imagine anyone less suited than herself to this restrained, cold and self-possessed man. And yet it was quite certain that he loved her madly. He would do anything in the world to please her. He was like wax in her hands. When she thought of one side he showed her, a side which only she had seen, she a little despised him. She wondered whether his sarcastic manner, with its contemptuous tolerance for so many persons and things she admired, was merely a façade to conceal a profound weakness. She supposed he was clever, everyone seemed to think he was, but except very occasionally when he was with two or three people he liked, and was in the mood, she had never found him entertaining. He did not precisely bore her, he left her indifferent.

CHAPTER XIV

THOUGH Kitty had met his wife at various tea parties, she had been some weeks in Hong-Kong before she saw Charles Townsend. She was introduced to him only when with her husband she went to dine at his house. Kitty was on the defensive. Charles Townsend was Assistant Colonial Secretary and she had no mind to allow him to use her with the condescension which notwithstanding her good manners she discerned in Mrs. Townsend. The room in which they were received was spacious. It was furnished as was every other drawing-room she had been in at Hong-Kong in a comfortable and homely style. It was a large party. They were the last to come and as they entered Chinese servants in uniform were handing round cocktails and olives. Mrs. Townsend greeted them in her casual fashion and looking at a list told Walter whom he was to take in to dinner.

Kitty saw a tall and very handsome man bear down on them.

"This is my husband."

"I am to have the privilege of sitting next to you," he said.

She immediately felt at ease and the sense of hostility vanished from her bosom. Though his eyes were smiling she had seen in them a quick look of surprise. She understood it perfectly and it made her inclined to laugh.

"I shan't be able to eat any dinner," he said, "and if I know Dorothy the dinner's damned good."

"Why not?"

"I ought to have been told. Someone really ought to have warned me."

"What about?"

"No one said a word. How was I to know that I was going to meet a raging beauty?"

"Now what am I to say to that?"

"Nothing. Leave me to do the talking. And I'll say it over and over again."

Kitty, unmoved, wondered what exactly his wife had told him about her. He must have asked. And Townsend, looking down on her with his laughing eyes, suddenly remembered.

"What is she like?" he had enquired when his wife told him she had met Dr. Fane's bride.

"Oh, quite a nice little thing. Actressy."

"Was she on the stage?"

"Oh, no, I don't think so. Her father's a doctor or a lawyer or something. I suppose we shall have to ask them to dinner."

"There's no hurry, is there?"

When they were sitting side by side at table he told her that he had known Walter Fane ever since he came to the Colony.

"We play bridge together. He's far and away the best bridge player at the Club."

She told Walter on the way home.

"That's not saying very much, you know."

"How does he play?"

"Not badly. He plays a winning hand very well, but when he has bad cards he goes all to pieces."

"Does he play as well as you?"

"I have no illusions about my play. I should describe myself as a very good player in the second class. Townsend thinks he's in the first. He isn't."

"Don't you like him?"

"I neither like him nor dislike him. I believe he's not bad at his job and everyone says he's a good sportsman. He doesn't very much interest me."

It was not the first time that Walter's moderation had exasperated her. She asked herself why it was necessary to be so prudent: you either liked people or you didn't. She had liked Charles Townsend very much. And she had not expected to. He was probably the most popular man in the Colony. It was supposed that the Colonial Secretary would retire soon and everyone hoped that Townsend would succeed him. He played tennis and polo and golf. He kept racing ponies. He was always ready to do anyone a good turn. He never let red tape interfere with him. He put on no airs. Kitty did not know why she had resented hearing him so well spoken of, she could not help thinking he must be very conceited: she had been extremely silly; that was the last thing you could accuse him of.

She had enjoyed her evening. They had talked of the theatres in London, and of Ascot and Cowes, all the things she knew about, so that really she might have met him at some nice house in Lennox Gardens; and later, when the men came into the drawing-room after dinner, he had strolled over and sat beside her again. Though he had not said anything very amusing, he had made her laugh; it must have been the way he said it: there was a caressing

sound in his deep, rich voice, a delightful expression in his kind, shining blue eyes, which made you feel very much at home with him. Of course he had charm. That was what made him so pleasant.

He was tall, six foot two at least, she thought, and he had a beautiful figure; he was evidently in very good condition and he had not a spare ounce of fat on him. He was well-dressed, the best-dressed man in the room, and he wore his clothes well. She liked a man to be smart. Her eyes wandered to Walter: he really should try to be a little better turned out. She noticed Townsend's cuff-links and waistcoat buttons; she had seen similar ones at Cartier's. Of course the Townsends had private means. His face was deeply sunburned, but the sun had not taken the healthy colour from his cheeks. She liked the little trim curly moustache which did not conceal his full red lips. He had black hair, short and brushed very sleek. But of course his eyes, under thick, bushy eyebrows, were his best feature: they were so very blue, and they had a laughing tenderness which persuaded you of the sweetness of his disposition. No man who had those blue eyes could bear to hurt anyone.

She could not but know that she had made an impression on him. If he had not said charming things to her his eyes, warm with admiration, would have betrayed him. His ease was delightful. He had no self-consciousness. Kitty was at home in these circumstances and she admired the way in which amid the banter which was the staple of their conversation he insinuated every now and then a pretty, flattering speech. When she shook hands with him on leaving he gave her hand a pressure that she could not mistake.

"I hope we shall see you again soon," he said casually, but his eyes gave his words a meaning which she could not fail to see.

"Hong-Kong is very small, isn't it?" she said.

CHAPTER XV

Who would have thought then that within three months they would be on such terms? He had told her since that he was crazy about her on that first evening. She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. He remembered the dress she wore; it was her wedding dress, and he said she looked like a lily of the valley. She

knew that he was in love with her before he told her, and a little frightened she kept him at a distance. He was impetuous and it was difficult. She was afraid to let him kiss her, for the thought of his arms about her made her heart beat so fast. She had never been in love before. It was wonderful. And now that she knew what love was she felt a sudden sympathy for the love that Walter bore her. She teased him, playfully, and saw that he enjoyed it. She had been perhaps a little afraid of him, but now she had more confidence. She chaffed him and it amused her to see the slow smile with which at first he received her banter. He was surprised and pleased. One of these days, she thought, he would become quite human. Now that she had learnt something of passion it diverted her to play lightly, like a harpist running his fingers across the strings of his harp, on his affections. She laughed when she saw how she bewildered and confused him.

And when Charlie became her lover the situation between herself and Walter seemed exquisitely absurd. She could hardly look at him, so grave and self-controlled, without laughing. She was too happy to feel unkindly toward him. Except for him, after all, she would never have known Charlie. She had hesitated some time before the final step, not because she did not want to yield to Charlie's passion, her own was equal to his, but because her upbringing and all the conventions of her life intimidated her. She was amazed afterwards (and the final act was due to accident; neither of them had seen the opportunity till it was face to face with them) to discover that she felt in no way different from what she had before. She had expected that it would cause some, she hardly knew what, fantastic change in her so that she would feel like somebody else; and when she had a chance to look at herself in the glass she was bewildered to see the same woman she had seen the day before.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked her.

"I adore you," she whispered.

"Don't you think you were very silly to waste so much time?"

"A perfect fool."

CHAPTER XVI

HER happiness, sometimes almost more than she could bear, renewed her beauty.* Just before she married, beginning to lose

her first freshness, she had looked tired and drawn. The uncharitable said that she was going off. But there is all the difference between a girl of twenty-five and a married woman of that age. She was like a rosebud that is beginning to turn yellow at the edges of the petals, and then suddenly she was a rose in full bloom. Her starry eyes gained a more significant expression; her skin (that feature which had always been her greatest pride and most anxious care) was dazzling: it could not be compared to the peach or to the flower; it was they that demanded comparison with it. She looked eighteen once more. She was at the height of her glowing loveliness. It was impossible not to remark it and her women friends asked her in little friendly asides if she was going to have a baby. The indifferent who had said she was just a very pretty woman with a long nose admitted that they had misjudged her. She was what Charlie had called her the first time he saw her, a raging beauty.

They managed their intrigue with skill. He had a broad back, he told her ("I will not have you swank about your figure," she interrupted lightly), and it did not matter about him; but for her sake they mustn't take the smallest risk. They could not meet often alone, not half often enough for him, but he had to think of her first, sometimes in the curio shop, now and then after luncheon in her house when no one was about; but she saw him a good deal here and there. It amused her then to see the formal way he spoke to her, jovial, for he was always that, with the same manner he used with everyone. Who could imagine when they heard him chaff her with that charming humour of his that so lately he had held her in his passionate arms?

She worshipped him. He was splendid, in his smart top-boots and his white breeches, when he played polo. In tennis clothes he looked a mere boy. Of course he was proud of his figure: it was the best figure she had ever seen. He took pains to keep it. He never ate bread or potatoes or butter. And he took a great deal of exercise. She liked the care he took of his hands; he was manicured once a week. He was a wonderful athlete and the year before he had won the local tennis championship. Certainly he was the best dancer she had ever danced with; it was a dream to dance with him. No one would think he was forty. She told him she did not believe it.

"I believe it's all bluff and you're really twenty-five."

He laughed. He was well pleased.

"Oh, my dear, I have a boy of fifteen. I'm a middle-aged gent. In another two or three years I shall just be a fat old party."

"You'll be adorable when you're a hundred."

She liked his black, bushy eyebrows. She wondered whether it was they that gave his blue eyes their disturbing expression.

He was full of accomplishments. He could play the piano quite well—rag-time, of course, and he could sing a comic song with a rich voice and good humour. She did not believe there was anything he could not do. He was very clever at his work too and she shared his pleasure when he told her that the Governor had particularly congratulated him on the way he had done some difficult job.

"Although it's I as says it," he laughed, his eyes charming with the love he bore her, "there's not a fellow in the Service who could have done it better."

Oh, how she wished that she were his wife rather than Walter's!

CHAPTER XVII

Of course it was not certain yet that Walter knew the truth, and if he didn't it was better perhaps to leave well alone; but if he did, well, in the end it would be the best thing for all of them. At first she had been, if not satisfied, at least resigned to seeing Charlie only by stealth; but time had increased her passion and for some while now she had been increasingly impatient of the obstacles which prevented them from being always together. He had told her so often that he cursed his position which forced him to be so discreet, the ties which bound him, and the ties which bound her: how marvellous it would have been, he said, if they were both free! She saw his point of view; no one wanted a scandal, and of course it required a good deal of thinking over before you changed the course of your life; but if freedom were thrust upon them, ah, then, how simple everything would be!

It was not as though anyone would suffer very much. She knew exactly what his relations were with his wife. She was a cold woman and there had been no love between them for years. It was habit that held them together, convenience, and of course the children. It was easier for Charlie than for her: Walter loved her; but after all, he was absorbed in his work; and a man always had

his club; he might be upset at first, but he would get over it; there was no reason why he should not marry somebody else. Charlie had told her that he could not make out how she came to throw herself away on Walter Fane.

She wondered, half smiling, why a little while before she had been terrified at the thought that Walter had caught them. Of course it was startling to see the handle of the door slowly turn. But, after all, they knew the worst that Walter could do, and they were ready for it. Charlie would feel as great a relief as she that what they both desired more than anything in the world should be thus forced upon them.

Walter was a gentleman—she would do him the justice to acknowledge that—and he loved her; he would do the right thing and allow her to divorce him. They had made a mistake and the lucky thing was that they had found it out before it was too late. She made up her mind exactly what she was going to say to him and how she would treat him. She would be kind, smiling, and firm. There was no need for them to quarrel. Later, on she would always be glad to see him. She hoped honestly that the two years they had spent together would remain with him as a priceless memory.

"I don't suppose Dorothy Townsend will mind divorcing Charlie a bit," she thought. "Now the youngest boy is going back to England it will be much nicer for her to be in England too. There's absolutely nothing for her to do in Hong-Kong. She'll be able to spend all the holidays with her boys. And then she's got her father and mother in England."

It was all very simple and everything could be managed without scandal or ill-feeling. And then she and Charlie could marry. Kitty drew a long sigh. They would be very happy. It was worth going through a certain amount of bother to achieve that. Confusedly, one picture jostling another, she thought of the life they would lead together, of the fun they would have and the little journeys they would take together, the house they would live in, the positions he would rise to and the help she would be to him. He would be very proud of her and she—she adored him.

But through all these day-dreams ran a current of apprehension. It was funny: it was as though the wood and the strings of the orchestra played Arcadian melodies and in the bass the drums, softly but with foreboding, beat a grim tattoo. Sooner or later Walter must come home and her heart beat fast at the thought of

meeting him. It was strange that he had gone away that afternoon without saying a word to her. Of course she was not frightened of him; after all what could he do, she repeated to herself; but she could not quite allay her uneasiness. Once more she repeated what she would say to him. What was the good of making a scene? She was very sorry, heaven knew she didn't want to cause him pain, but she couldn't help it if she didn't love him. It was no good pretending and it was always better to tell the truth. She hoped he wouldn't be unhappy, but they had made a mistake and the only sensible thing was to acknowledge it. She would always think kindly of him.

But even as she said this to herself a sudden gust of fear made the sweat start out in the palms of her hands. And because she was frightened she grew angry with him. If he wanted to make a scene, that was his look-out; he must not be surprised if he got more than he bargained for. She would tell him that she had never cared two pins for him and that not a day had passed since their marriage without her regretting it. He was dull. Oh, how he'd bored her, bored her, bored her! He thought himself so much better than anyone else, it was laughable; he had no sense of humour; she hated his supercilious air, his coldness, and his self-control. It was easy to be self-controlled when you were interested in nothing and nobody but yourself. He was repulsive to her. She hated to let him kiss her. What had he to be so conceited about? He danced rottenly, he was a wet blanket at a party, he couldn't play or sing, he couldn't play polo and his tennis was no better than anybody else's. Bridge? Who cared about bridge?

Kitty worked herself up into a towering passion. Let him dare to reproach her. All that had happened was his own fault. She was thankful that he knew the truth at last. She hated him and wished never to see him again. Yes, she was thankful that it was all over. Why couldn't he leave her alone? He had pestered her into marrying him and now she was fed up.

"Fed up," she repeated aloud, trembling with anger. "Fed up! Fed up!"

She heard the car draw up to the gate of their garden. He was coming up the stairs.

CHAPTER XVIII

He came into the room: Her heart was beating wildly and her hands were shaking; it was lucky that she lay on the sofa. She was holding an open book as though she had been reading. He stood for an instant on the threshold and their eyes met. Her heart sank; she felt on a sudden a cold chill pass through her limbs and she shivered. She had that feeling which you describe by saying that someone was walking over your grave. His face was deathly pale; she had seen it like that once before, when they sat together in the Park and he asked her to marry him. His dark eyes, immobile and inscrutable, seemed preternaturally large. He knew everything.

"You're back early," she remarked.

Her lips trembled so that she could hardly frame the words. She was terrified. She was afraid she would faint.

"I think it's about the usual time."

His voice sounded strange to her. It was raised on the last word in order to give his remark a casual air, but it was forced. She wondered if he saw that she was shaking in every limb. It was only by an effort that she did not scream. He dropped his eyes.

"I'm just going to dress."

He left the room. She was shattered. For two or three minutes she could not stir, but at last, raising herself from the sofa with difficulty, as though she had had an illness and were still weak, she found her feet. She did not know if her legs would support her. She felt her way by means of chairs and tables to the veranda and then with one hand on the wall went to her room. She put on a tea-gown and when she went back into her boudoir (they only used the drawing-room when there was a party) he was standing at a table looking at the pictures of the *Sketch*. She had to force herself to enter.

"Shall we go down? Dinner is ready."

"Have I kept you waiting?"

It was dreadful that she could not control the trembling of her lips.

When was he going to speak?

They sat down and for a moment there was silence between them. Then he made a remark and because it was so commonplace it had a sinister air.

"The *Empress* didn't come in to-day," he said. "I wonder if she's been delayed by a storm."

"Was she due to-day?"

"Yes."

She looked at him now and saw that his eyes were fixed on his plate. He made another observation, equally trivial, about a tennis tournament that was about to be played, and he spoke at length. His voice as a rule was agreeable, with a variety of tone, but now he spoke on one note. It was strangely unnatural. It gave Kitty the impression that he was speaking from a long way off. And all the time his eyes were directed to his plate, or the table, or to a picture on the wall. He would not meet hers. She realised that he could not bear to look at her.

"Shall we go upstairs?" he said when dinner was finished.

"If you like."

She rose and he held open the door for her. His eyes were cast down as she passed him. When they reached the sitting-room he took up the illustrated paper once more.

"Is this a new *Sketch*? I don't think I've seen it."

"I don't know. I haven't noticed."

It had been lying about for a fortnight and she knew that he had looked it through and through. He took it and sat down. She lay again on the sofa and took her book. As a rule in the evening, when they were alone, they played coon-can or patience. He was leaning back in an arm-chair, in a comfortable attitude, and his attention seemed absorbed by the illustration he was looking at. He did not turn the page. She tried to read, but she could not see the print before her eyes. The words were blurred. Her head began to ache violently.

When would he speak?

They sat in silence for an hour. She gave up the pretence of reading and, letting her novel fall on her lap, gazed into space. She was afraid to make the smallest gesture or the smallest sound. He sat quite still, in that same easy attitude, and stared with those wide, immobile eyes of his at the picture. His stillness was strangely menacing. It gave Kitty the feeling of a wild beast prepared to spring.

When suddenly he stood up she started. She clenched her hands and she felt herself grow pale. Now!

"I have some work to do," he said in that quiet, toneless voice, his eyes averted. "If you don't mind I'll go into my

study. I dare say you'll have gone to bed by the time I've finished."

"I *am* rather tired to-night."

"Well, good-night."

"Good-night."

He left the room.

CHAPTER XIX

As soon as she could next morning she rang Townsend up at his office:

"Yes, what is it?"

"I want to see you."

"My dear, I'm awfully busy. I'm a working man."

"It's very important. Can I come down to the office?"

"Oh, no, I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Well, come here, then."

"I can't possibly get away. What about this afternoon? And don't you think it would be better if I didn't come to your house?"

"I must see you at once."

There was a pause and she was afraid that she had been cut off.

"Are you there?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, I was thinking. Has anything happened?"

"I can't tell you over the telephone."

There was another silence before he spoke again.

"Well, look here, I can manage to see you for ten minutes at one if that'll do. You'd better go to Ku-Chou's and I'll come along as soon as I can."

"The curio shop?" she asked in dismay.

"Well, we can't meet in the lounge at the Hong-Kong Hotel very well," he answered.

She noticed a trace of irritation in his voice.

"Very well. I'll go to Ku-Chou's."

CHAPTER XX

SHE got out of her rickshaw in the Victoria Road and walked up the steep, narrow lane till she came to the shop. She lingered

outside a moment as though her attention were attracted by the bric-à-brac which was displayed. But a boy who was standing there on the watch for customers, recognising her at once, gave her a broad smile of connivance. He said something in Chinese to someone within and the master, a little, fat-faced man in a black gown, came out and greeted her. She walked in quickly.

"Mr. Townsend no come yet. You go top-side, yes?"

She went to the back of the shop and walked up the rickety, dark stairs. The Chinese followed her and unlocked the door that led into the bedroom. It was stuffy and there was an acrid smell of opium. She sat down on a sandalwood chest.

In a moment she heard a heavy step on the creaking stairs. Townsend came in and shut the door behind him. His face bore a sullen look; as he saw her it vanished, and he smiled in that charming way of his. He took her quickly in his arms and kissed her lips.

"Now what's the trouble?"

"It makes me feel better just to see you," she smiled.

He sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette.

"You look rather washed out this morning."

"I don't wonder," she answered. "I don't think I closed my eyes all night."

He gave her a look. He was smiling still, but his smile was a little set and unnatural. She thought there was a shade of anxiety in his eyes.

"He knows," she said.

There was an instant's pause before he answered.

"What did he say?"

"He hasn't said anything."

"What!" He looked at her sharply. "What makes you think he knows?"

"Everything. His look. The way he talked at dinner."

"Was he disagreeable?"

"No, on the contrary, he was scrupulously polite. For the first time since we married he didn't kiss me good-night."

She dropped her eyes. She was not sure if Charlie understood. As a rule Walter took her in his arms and pressed his lips to hers and would not let them go. His whole body grew tender and passionate with his kiss.

"Why do you imagine he didn't say anything?"

"I don't know." • •

There was a pause. Kitty sat very still on the sandalwood box and looked with anxious attention at Townsend. His face once more was sullen and there was a frown between his brows. His mouth drooped a little at the corners. But all at once he looked up and a gleam of malicious amusement came into his eyes.

"I wonder if he is going to say anything."

She did not answer. She did not know what he meant.

"After all, he wouldn't be the first man who's shut his eyes in a case of this sort. What has he to gain by making a row? If he'd wanted to make a row he would have insisted on coming into your room." His eyes twinkled and his lips broke into a broad smile. "We should have looked a pair of damned fools."

"I wish you could have seen his face last night."

"I expect he was upset. It was naturally a shock. It's a damned humiliating position for any man. He always looks a fool. Walter doesn't give me the impression of a fellow who'd care to wash a lot of dirty linen in public."

"I don't think he would," she answered reflectively. "He's very sensitive, I've discovered that."

"That's all to the good as far as we're concerned. You know, it's a very good plan to put yourself in somebody else's shoes and ask yourself how you would act in his place. There's only one way in which a man can save his face when he's in that sort of position and that is to pretend he knows nothing. I bet you anything you like that that is exactly what he's going to do."

The more Townsend talked the more buoyant he became. His blue eyes sparkled and he was once more his gay and jovial self. He irradiated an encouraging confidence.

"Heavens knows, I don't want to say anything disagreeable about him, but when you come down to brass tacks a bacteriologist is no great shakes. The chances are that I shall be Colonial Secretary when Simmons goes home, and it's to Walter's interest to keep on the right side of me. He's got his bread and butter to think of, like the rest of us: do you think the Colonial Office are going to do much for a fellow who makes a scandal? Believe me, he's got everything to gain by holding his tongue and everything to lose by kicking up a row."

Kitty moved uneasily. She knew how shy Walter was and she could believe that the fear of a scene, and the dread of public attention, might have influence upon him; but she could not believe that he would be affected by the thought of a material

advantage. Perhaps she didn't know him very well, but Charlie didn't know him at all.

"Has it occurred to you that he's madly in love with me?"

He did not answer, but he smiled at her with roguish eyes. She knew and loved that charming look of his.

"Well, what is it? I know you're going to say something awful."

"Well, you know, women are often under the impression that men are much more madly in love with them than they really are."

For the first time she laughed. His confidence was catching.

"What a monstrous thing to say."

"I put it to you that you haven't been bothering much about your husband lately. Perhaps he isn't quite so much in love with you as he was."

"At all events I shall never delude myself that *you* are madly in love with me," she retorted.

"That's where you're wrong."

Ah, how good it was to hear him say that! She knew it and her belief in his passion warmed her heart. As he spoke he rose from the bed and came and sat down beside her on the sandalwood box. He put his arm round her waist.

"Don't worry your silly little head a moment longer," he said. "I promise you there's nothing to fear. I'm as certain as I am of anything that he's going to pretend he knows nothing. You know, this sort of thing is awfully difficult to prove. You say he's in love with you; perhaps he doesn't want to lose you altogether. I swear I'd accept anything rather than that if you were my wife."

She leaned toward him. Her body became limp and yielding against his arm. The love she felt for him was almost torture. His last words had struck her: perhaps Walter loved her so passionately that he was prepared to accept any humiliation if sometimes she would let him love her. She could understand that; for that was how she felt toward Charlie. A thrill of pride passed through her, and at the same time a faint sensation of contempt for a man who could love so slavishly.

She put her arm lovingly round Charlie's neck.

"You're simply wonderful. I was shaking like a leaf when I came here and you've made everything all right."

He took her face in his hand and kissed her lips.

"Darling."

"You're such a comfort to me," she sighed.

"I'm sure you need not be nervous. And you know I'll stand by you. I won't let you down."

She put away her fears, but for an instant unreasonably she regretted that her plans for the future were shattered. Now that all danger was past she almost wished that Walter were going to insist on a divorce.

"I knew I could count on you," she said.

"So I should hope."

"Oughtn't you to go and have your tiffin?"

"Oh, damn my tiffin."

He drew her more closely to him and now she was held tight in his arms. His mouth sought hers.

"Oh, Charlie, you must let me go."

"Never."

She gave a little laugh, a laugh of happy love and of triumph; his eyes were heavy with desire. He lifted her to her feet and not letting her go but holding her close to his breast he locked the door.

CHAPTER XXI

ALL through the afternoon she thought of what Charlie had said about Walter. They were dining out that evening and when he came back from the Club she was dressing. He knocked at her door.

"Come in."

He did not open.

"I'm going straight along to dress. How long will you be?"

"Ten minutes."

He said nothing more, but went to his own room. His voice had that constrained note which she had heard in it the night before. She felt fairly sure of herself now. She was ready before he was and when he came downstairs she was already seated in the car.

"I'm afraid I've kept you waiting," he said.

"I shall survive it," she replied, and she was able to smile as she spoke.

She made an observation or two as they drove down the hill, but he answered curtly. She shrugged her shoulders; she was growing a trifle impatient: if he wanted to sulk, let him, she didn't care.

They drove, in silence till they reached their destination. It was a large dinner party. There were too many people and too many courses. While Kitty chatted gaily with her neighbours she watched Walter. He was deathly pale and his face was pinched.

"Your husband is looking rather washed out. I thought he didn't mind the heat. Has he been working very hard?"

"He always works hard."

"I suppose you're going away soon?"

"Oh yes, I think I shall go to Japan as I did last year," she said. "The doctor says I must get out of the heat if I don't want to go all to pieces."

Walter did not as usual when they were dining out give her a little smiling glance now and then. He never looked at her. She had noticed that when he came down to the car he kept his eyes averted, and he did the same when, with his usual politeness, he gave her his hand to alight. Now, talking with the women on either side of him, he did not smile, but looked at them with steady and unblinking eyes; and really his eyes looked enormous and in that pale face coal-black. His face was set and stern.

"He must be an agreeable companion," thought Kitty ironically.

The idea of those unfortunate ladies trying to indulge in small talk with that grim mask not a little diverted her.

Of course he knew; there was no doubt about that, and he was furious with her. Why hadn't he said anything? Was it really because, though angry and hurt, he loved her so much that he was afraid she would leave him. The thought made her ever so slightly despise him, but good-naturedly: after all, he was her husband and he provided her with board and lodging; so long as he didn't interfere with her and let her do as she liked she would be quite nice to him. On the other hand perhaps his silence was due merely to a morbid timidity. Charlie was right when he said that no one would hate a scandal more than Walter. He never made a speech if he could help it. He had told her once that when he was subpoenaed as a witness on a case where he was to give expert evidence he had hardly slept for a week before. His shyness was a disease.

And there was another thing: men were very vain, and so long as no one knew what had happened it might be that Walter would be content to ignore it. Then she wondered whether by any possibility Charlie was right when he suggested that Walter knew which side his bread was buttered. Charlie was the most popular

man in the Colony and soon would be Colonial Secretary. He could be very useful to Walter: on the other hand he could make himself very unpleasant if Walter put his back up. Her heart exulted as she thought of her lover's strength and determination; she felt so defenceless in his virile arms. Men were strange: it would never have occurred to her that Walter was capable of such baseness, and yet you never knew; perhaps his seriousness was merely a mask for a mean and pettifogging nature. The more she considered it the more likely it seemed that Charlie was right; and she turned her glance once more on her husband. There was no indulgence in it.

It happened that just then the women on either side of him were talking with their neighbours and he was left alone. He was staring straight in front of him, forgetful of the party, and his eyes were filled with a mortal sadness. It gave Kitty a shock.

CHAPTER XXII

NEXT day when she was lying down after luncheon, dozing, she was aroused by a knock at her door.

"Who is it?" she cried irritably.

At that hour she was unaccustomed to be disturbed.

"I."

She recognised her husband's voice and she sat up quickly.

"Come in."

"Did I wake you?" he asked as he entered.

"In point of fact you did," she answered in the natural tone she had adopted with him for the last two days.

"Will you come into the next room. I want to have a little talk with you."

Her heart gave a sudden beat against her ribs.

"I'll put on a dressing-gown."

He left her. She slipped her bare feet into mules and wrapped herself in a kimono. She looked in the glass; she was very pale and she put on some rouge. She stood at the door for a moment, nerving herself for the interview, and then with a bold face joined him.

"How did you manage to get away from the laboratory at this hour?" she said. "I don't often see you at this sort of time."

"Won't you sit down?"

He did not look at her. He spoke gravely. She was glad to do as he asked: her knees were a little shaky, and unable to continue in that jocular tone she kept silent. He sat also and lit a cigarette. His eyes wandered restlessly about the room. He seemed to have some difficulty in starting.

Suddenly he looked full at her; and because he had held his eyes so long averted, his direct gaze gave her such a fright that she smothered a cry.

"Have you ever heard of Mei-tan-fu?" he asked. "There's been a good deal about it in the papers lately."

She stared at him in astonishment. She hesitated.

"Is that the place where there's cholera? Mr. Arbuthnot was talking about it last night."

"There's an epidemic. I believe it's the worst they've had for years. There was a medical missionary there. He died of cholera three days ago. There's a French convent there and of course there's the Customs man. Everyone else has got out."

His eyes were still fixed on her and she could not lower hers. She tried to read his expression, but she was nervous, and she could only discern a strange watchfulness. How could he look so steadily? He did not even blink.

"The French nuns are doing what they can. They've turned the orphanage into a hospital. But the people are dying like flies. I've offered to go and take charge."

"You?"

She started violently. Her first thought was that if he went she would be free and without let or hindrance could see Charlie. But the thought shocked her. She felt herself go scarlet. Why did he watch her like that? She looked away in embarrassment.

"Is that necessary?" she faltered.

"There's not a foreign doctor in the place."

"But you're not a doctor, you're a bacteriologist."

"I am an M.D., you know, and before I specialised I did a good deal of general work in a hospital. The fact that I'm first and foremost a bacteriologist is all to the good. It will be an admirable chance for research work."

He spoke almost flippantly and when she glanced at him she was surprised to see in his eyes a gleam of mockery. She could not understand.

"But won't it be awfully dangerous?"

"Awfully."

He smiled. It was a derisive grimace. She leaned her forehead on her hand. Suicide. It was nothing short of that. Dreadful! She had not thought he would take it like that. She couldn't let him do that. It was cruel. It was not her fault if she did not love him. She couldn't bear the thought that he should kill himself for her sake. Tears flowed softly down her cheeks.

"What are you crying for?"

His voice was cold.

"You're not obliged to go, are you?"

"No, I go of my own free will."

"Please don't, Walter. It would be too awful if something happened. Supposing you died?"

Though his face remained impassive the shadow of a smile once more crossed his eyes. He did not answer.

"Where is this place?" she asked after a pause.

"Mei-tan-fu? It's on a tributary of the Western River. We should go up the Western River and then by chair."

"Who is we?"

"You and I."

She looked at him quickly. She thought she had heard amiss. But now the smile in his eyes had travelled to his lips. His dark eyes were fixed on her.

"Are you expecting me to come too?"

"I thought you'd like to."

Her breath began to come very fast. A shudder passed through her.

"But surely it's no place for a woman. The missionary sent his wife and children down weeks ago and the A. P. C. man and his wife came down. I met her at a tea party. I've just remembered that she said they left some place on account of cholera."

"There are five French nuns there."

Panic seized her.

"I don't know what you mean. It would be madness for me to go. You know how delicate I am. Dr. Hayward said I must get out of Hong-Kong on account of the heat. I could never stand the heat up there. And cholera: I should be frightened out of my wits. It's just asking for trouble. There's no reason for me to go. I should die."

He did not answer. She looked at him in her desperation and she could hardly restrain a cry. His face had a sort of black pallor

which suddenly terrified her. She saw in it a look of hatred. Was it possible that he wanted her to die? She answered her own outrageous thought.

"It's absurd. If you think you ought to go it's your own lookout. But really you can't expect me to. I hate illness. A cholera epidemic. I don't pretend to be very brave and I don't mind telling you that I haven't pluck for that. I shall stay here until it's time for me to go to Japan."

"I should have thought that you would want to accompany me when I am about to set out on a dangerous expedition."

He was openly mocking her now. She was confused. She did not quite know whether he meant what he said or was merely trying to frighten her.

"I don't think anyone could reasonably blame me for refusing to go to a dangerous place where I had no business or where I could be of no use."

"You could be of the greatest use; you could cheer and comfort me."

She grew even a little paler.

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"I shouldn't have thought it needed more than average intelligence."

"I'm not going, Walter. It's monstrous to ask me."

"Then I shall not go either. I shall immediately file my petition."

CHAPTER XXIII

SHE looked at him blankly. What he said was so unexpected that at the first moment she could hardly gather its sense.

"What on earth are you talking about?" she faltered.

Even to herself her reply rang false, and she saw the look of disdain which it called forth on Walter's stern face.

"I'm afraid you've thought me a bigger fool than I am."

She did not quite know what to say. She was undecided whether indignantly to assert her innocence or to break out into angry reproaches. He seemed to read her thoughts.

"I've got all the proof necessary."

She began to cry. The tears flowed from her eyes without any particular anguish and she did not dry them: to weep gave her a

little time to collect herself. But her mind was blank. He watched her without concern, and his calmness frightened her. He grew impatient.

"You're not going to do much good by crying, you know."

His voice, so cold and hard, had the effect of exciting in her a certain indignation. She was recovering her nerve.

"I don't care. I suppose you have no objection to my divorcing you. It means nothing to a man."

"Will you allow me to ask why I should put myself to the smallest inconvenience on your account?"

"It can't make any difference to you. It's not much to ask you to behave like a gentleman."

"I have much too great a regard for your welfare."

She sat up now and dried her eyes.

"What do you mean?" she asked him.

"Townsend will marry you only if he is co-respondent and the case is so shameless that his wife is forced to divorce him."

"You don't know what you're talking about," she cried.

"You stupid fool."

His tone was so contemptuous that she flushed with anger. And perhaps her anger was greater because she had never before heard him say to her any but sweet, flattering and delightful things. She had been accustomed to find him subservient to all her whims.

"If you want the truth you can have it. He's only too anxious to marry me. Dorothy Townsend is perfectly willing to divorce him and we shall be married the moment we're free."

"Did he tell you that in so many words or is that the impression you have gained from his manner?"

Walter's eyes shone with bitter mockery. They made Kitty a trifle uneasy. She was not quite sure that Charlie had ever said exactly that in so many words.

"He's said it over and over again."

"That's a lie and you know it's a lie."

"He loves me with all his heart and soul. He loves me as passionately as I love him. You've found out. I'm not going to deny anything. Why should I? We've been lovers for a year and I'm proud of it. He means everything in the world to me and I'm glad that you know at last. We're sick to death of secrecy and compromise and all the rest of it. It was a mistake that I ever married you, I never should have done it, I was a fool. I never

cared for you. We never had anything in common. I don't like the people you like and I'm bored by the things that interest you. I'm thankful it's finished."

He watched her without a gesture and without a movement of his face. He listened attentively and no change in his expression showed that what she said affected him.

"Do you know why I married you?"

"Because you wanted to be married before your sister Doris."

It was true, but it gave her a funny little turn to realise that he knew it. Oddly enough, even in that moment of fear and anger, it excited her compassion. He faintly smiled.

"I had no illusions about you," he said. "I knew you were silly and frivolous and empty-headed. But I loved you. I knew that your aims and ideals were vulgar and commonplace. But I loved you. I knew that you were second-rate. But I loved you. It's comic when I think how hard I tried to be amused by the things that amused you and how anxious I was to hide from you that I wasn't ignorant and vulgar and scandal-mongering and stupid. I knew how frightened you were of intelligence and I did everything I could to make you think me as big a fool as the rest of the men you knew. I knew that you'd only married me for convenience. I loved you so much, I didn't care. Most people, as far as I can see, when they're in love with someone and the love isn't returned feel that they have a grievance. They grow angry and bitter. I wasn't like that. I never expected you to love me, I didn't see any reason that you should, I never thought myself very lovable. I was thankful to be allowed to love you and I was enraptured when now and then I thought you were pleased with me or when I noticed in your eyes a gleam of good-humoured affection. I tried not to bore you with my love; I knew I couldn't afford to do that and I was always on the look-out for the first sign that you were impatient with my affection. What most husbands expect as a right I was prepared to receive as a favour."

Kitty, accustomed to flattery all her life, had never heard such things said to her before. Blind wrath, driving out fear, arose in her heart: it seemed to choke her, and she felt the blood-vessels in her temples swell and throb. Wounded vanity can make a woman more vindictive than a lioness robbed of her cubs. Kitty's jaw, always a little too square, protruded with an apish hideousness and her beautiful eyes were black with malice. But she kept her temper in check.

"If a man hasn't what's necessary to make a woman love him, it's his fault, not hers."

"Evidently."

His derisive tone increased her irritation. She felt that she could wound him more by maintaining her calm.

"I'm not very well-educated and I'm not very clever. I'm just a perfectly ordinary young woman. I like the things that the people like among whom I've lived all my life. I like dancing and tennis and theatres and I like the men who play games. It's quite true that I've always been bored by you and by the things you like. They mean nothing to me and I don't want them to. You dragged me round those interminable galleries in Venice: I should have enjoyed myself much more playing golf at Sandwich."

"I know."

"I'm sorry if I haven't been all that you expected me to be. Unfortunately I always found you physically repulsive. You can hardly blame me for that."

"I don't."

Kitty could more easily have coped with the situation if he had raved and stormed. She could have met violence with violence. His self-control was inhuman and she hated him now as she had never hated him before.

"I don't think you're a man at all. Why didn't you break into the room when you knew I was there with Charlie? You might at least have tried to thrash him. Were you afraid?"

But the moment she had said this she flushed, for she was ashamed. He did not answer, but in his eyes she read an icy disdain. The shadow of a smile flickered on his lips.

"It may be that, like a historical character, I am too proud to fight."

Kitty, unable to think of anything to answer, shrugged her shoulders. For a moment longer he held her in his immobile gaze.

"I think I've said all I had to say: if you refuse to come to Mei-tan-fu I shall file my petition."

"Why won't you consent to let me divorce you?"

He took his eyes off her at last. He leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette. He smoked it to the end without saying a word. Then, throwing away the butt, he gave a little smile. He looked at her once more.

"If Mrs. Townsend will give me her assurance that she will

divorce her husband and if he will give me his written promise to marry you within a week of the two decrees being made absolute, I will do that."

There was something in the way he spoke which disconcerted her. But her self-respect obliged her to accept his offer in the grand manner.

"That is very generous of you, Walter."

To her astonishment he burst suddenly into a shout of laughter. She flushed angrily.

"What are you laughing at? I see nothing to laugh at."

"I beg your pardon. I dare say my sense of humour is peculiar."

She looked at him, frowning. She would have liked to say something bitter and wounding, but no rejoinder occurred to her. He looked at his watch.

"You had better look sharp if you want to catch Townsend at his office. If you decide to come with me to Mei-tan-fu it will be necessary to start the day after to-morrow."

"Do you want me to tell him to-day?"

"They say there is no time like the present."

Her heart began to beat a little faster. It was not uneasiness that she felt, it was—she didn't quite know what it was. She wished she could have had a little longer; she would have liked to prepare Charlie. But she had the fullest confidence in him, he loved her as much as she loved him, and it was treacherous even to let the thought cross her mind that he would not welcome the necessity that was forced upon them. She turned to Walter gravely.

"I don't think you know what love is. You have no conception how desperately in love Charlie and I are with one another. It really is the only thing that matters and every sacrifice that our love calls for will be as easy as falling off a log."

He gave a little bow, but said nothing, and his eyes followed her as she walked with measured step from the room.

CHAPTER XXIV

SHE sent in a little note to Charlie on which she had written: "*Please see me. It is urgent.*" A Chinese boy asked her to wait and brought the answer that Mr. Townsend would see her in five
o.

minutes. She was unaccountably nervous. When at last she was ushered into his room Charlie came forward to shake hands with her, but the moment the boy, having closed the door, left them alone he dropped the affable formality of his manner.

"I say, my dear, you really mustn't come here in working hours. I've got an awful lot to do and we don't want to give people a chance to gossip."

She gave him a long look with those beautiful eyes of hers and tried to smile, but her lips were stiff and she could not.

"I wouldn't have come unless it was necessary."

He smiled and took her arm.

"Well, since you're here, come and sit down."

It was a bare room, narrow, with a high ceiling; its walls were painted in two shades of terra cotta. The only furniture consisted of a large desk, a revolving chair for Townsend to sit in and a leather arm-chair for visitors. It intimidated Kitty to sit in this. He sat at the desk. She had never seen him in spectacles before; she did not know that he used them. When he noticed that her eyes were on them he took them off.

"I only use them for reading," he said.

Her tears came easily and now, she hardly knew why, she began to cry. She had no deliberate intention of deceiving, but rather an instinctive desire to excite his sympathy. He looked at her blankly.

"Is anything the matter? Oh, my dear, don't cry."

She took out her handkerchief and tried to check her sobs. He rang the bell and when the boy came to the door went to it.

"If anyone asks for me say I'm out."

"Very good, sir."

The boy closed the door. Charlie sat on the arm of the chair and put his arm round Kitty's shoulders.

"Now, Kitty dear, tell me all about it."

"Walter wants a divorce," she said.

She felt the pressure of his arm on her shoulder cease. His body stiffened. There was a moment's silence, then Townsend rose from her chair and sat down once more in his.

"What exactly do you mean?" he said.

She looked at him quickly, for his voice was hoarse, and she saw that his face was dully red.

"I've had a talk with him. I've come straight from the house now. He says he has all the proof he wants."

"You didn't commit yourself, did you? You didn't acknowledge anything?"

Her heart sank.

"No," she answered.

"Are you quite sure?" he asked, looking at her sharply.

"Quite sure," she lied again.

He leaned back in his chair and stared vacantly at the map of China which was hanging on the wall in front of him. She watched him anxiously. She was somewhat disconcerted at the manner in which he had received the news. She had expected him to take her in his arms and tell her he was thankful, for now they could be together always; but of course men were funny. She was crying softly, not now to arouse sympathy, but because it seemed the natural thing to do.

"This is a bloody mess we've got into," he said at length. "But it's no good losing our heads. Crying isn't going to do us any good, you know."

She noticed the irritation in his voice and dried her eyes.

"It's not my fault, Charlie. I couldn't help it."

"Of course you couldn't. It was just damned bad luck. I was just as much to blame as you were. The thing to do now is to see how we're going to get out of it. I don't suppose you want to be divorced any more than I do."

She smothered a gasp. She gave him a searching look. He was not thinking of her at all.

"I wonder what his proofs really are. I don't know how he can actually prove that we were together in that room. On the whole we've been about as careful as anyone could be. I'm sure that old fellow at the curio shop wouldn't have given us away. Even if he'd seen us go in, there's no reason why we shouldn't hunt curios together."

He was talking to himself rather than to her.

"It's easy enough to bring charges, but it's damned difficult to prove them; any lawyer will tell you that. Our line is to deny everything, and if he threatens to bring an action we'll tell him to go to hell and we'll fight it."

"I couldn't go into court, Charlie."

"Why on earth not? I'm afraid you'll have to. God knows, I don't want a row, but we can't take it lying down."

"Why need we defend it?"

"What a question to ask. After all, it's not only you that are

concerned, I'm concerned too. But as a matter of fact I don't think you need be afraid of that. We shall be able to square your husband somehow. The only thing that worries me is the best way to set about it."

It looked as though an idea occurred to him, for he turned towards her with his charming smile and his tone, a moment before abrupt and businesslike, became ingratiating.

"I'm afraid you've been awfully upset, poor little woman. It's too bad." He stretched out his hand and took hers. "It's a scrape we've got into, but we shall get out of it. It's not . . ." He stopped and Kitty had a suspicion that he had been about to say that it was not the first he had got out of. "The greatest thing is to keep our heads. You know I shall never let you down."

"I'm not frightened. I don't care what he does."

He smiled still, but perhaps his smile was a trifle forced.

"If the worst comes to the worst I shall have to tell the Governor. He'll curse me like hell, but he's a good fellow and a man of the world. He'll fix it up somehow. It wouldn't do him any good if there was a scandal."

"What can he do?" asked Kitty.

"He can bring pressure to bear on Walter. If he can't get at him through his ambition he'll get at him through his sense of duty."

Kitty was a little chilled. She did not seem able to make Charlie see how desperately grave the situation was. His airiness made her impatient. She was sorry that she had come to see him in his office. The surroundings intimidated her. It would have been much easier to say what she wanted if she could have been in his arms with hers round his neck.

"You don't know Walter," she said.

"I know that every man has his price."

She loved Charlie with all her heart, but his reply disconcerted her; for such a clever man it was a stupid thing to say.

"I don't think you realise how angry Walter is. You haven't seen his face and the look of his eyes."

He did not reply for a moment, but looked at her with a slight smile. She knew what he was thinking. Walter was the bacteriologist and occupied a subordinate position; he would hardly have the impudence to make himself a nuisance to the upper officials of the Colony.

"It's no good deceiving yourself, Charlie," she said earnestly. "If Walter has made up his mind to bring an action nothing

that you or anybody else can say will have the slightest influence."

His face once more grew heavy and sulky.

"Is it his idea to make me co-respondent?"

"At first it was. At last I managed to get him to consent to let me divorce him."

"Oh, well, that's not so terrible." His manner relaxed again and she saw the relief in his eyes. "That seems to me a very good way out. After all, it's the least a man can do, it's the only decent thing."

"But he makes a condition."

He gave her an inquiring glance and he seemed to reflect.

"Of course I'm not a very rich man, but I'll do anything in my power."

Kitty was silent. Charlie was saying things which she would never have expected him to say. And they made it difficult for her to speak. She had expected to blurt it out in one breath, held in his loving arms, with her burning face hid on his breast.

"He agrees to my divorcing him if your wife will give him the assurance that she will divorce you."

"Anything else?"

Kitty could hardly find her voice.

"And—it's awfully hard to say, Charlie, it sounds dreadful—if you'll promise to marry me within a week of the decrees being made absolute."

CHAPTER XXV

FOR a moment he was silent. Then he took her hand again and pressed it gently:

"You know, darling," he said, "whatever happens we must keep Dorothy out of this."

She looked at him blankly.

"But I don't understand. How can we?"

"Well, we can't only think of ourselves in this world. You know, other things being equal, there's nothing in this world I'd love more than to marry you. But it's quite out of the question. I know Dorothy: nothing would induce her to divorce me."

Kitty was becoming horribly frightened. She began to cry again. He got up and sat down beside her with his arm round her waist.

"Try not to upset yourself, darling. We must keep our heads."

"I thought you loved me . . ."

"Of course I love you," he said tenderly. "You surely can't have any doubt of that now."

"If she won't divorce you Walter will make you co-respondent."

He took an appreciable time to answer. His tone was dry.

"Of course that would ruin my career, but I'm afraid it wouldn't do you much good. If the worst came to the worst I should make a clean breast of it to Dorothy; she'd be dreadfully hurt and wretched, but she'd forgive me." He had an idea. "I'm not sure if the best plan wouldn't be to make a clean breast of it anyhow. If she went to your husband I dare say she could persuade him to hold his tongue."

"Does that mean you don't want her to divorce you?"

"Well, I have got my boys to think of, haven't I? And naturally I don't want to make her unhappy. We've always got on very well together. She's been an awfully good wife to me, you know."

"Why did you tell me that she meant nothing to you?"

"I never did. I said I wasn't in love with her. We haven't slept together for years except now and then, on Christmas Day for instance, or the day before she was going home or the day she came back. She isn't a woman who cares for that sort of thing. But we've always been excellent friends. I don't mind telling you that I depend on her more than anyone has any idea of."

"Don't you think it would have been better to leave me alone, then?"

She found it strange that with terror catching her breath she could speak so calmly.

"You were the loveliest little thing I'd seen for years. I just fell madly in love with you. You can't blame me for that."

"After all, you said you'd never let me down."

"But, good God, I'm not going to let you down. We've got in an awful scrape and I'm going to do everything that's humanly possible to get you out of it."

"Except the one obvious and natural thing."

He stood up and returned to his own chair.

"My dear, you must be reasonable. We'd much better face the situation frankly. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but really I must tell you the truth. I'm very keen on my career. There's no reason why I shouldn't be a Governor one of these days, and it's a

damned soft job to be a Colonial Governor. Unless we can hush this up I don't stand a dog's chance. I may not have to leave the Service, but there'll always be a black mark against me. If I do have to leave the Service then I must go into business in China where I know people. In either case my only chance is for Dorothy to stick to me."

"Was it necessary to tell me that you wanted nothing in the world but me?"

The corners of his mouth drooped peevishly.

"Oh, my dear, it's rather hard to take quite literally the things a man says when he's in love with you."

"Didn't you mean them?"

"At the moment."

"And what's to happen to me if Walter divorces me?"

"If we really haven't a leg to stand on of course we won't defend. There shouldn't be any publicity and people are pretty broad-minded nowadays."

For the first time Kitty thought of her mother. She shivered. She looked again at Townsend. Her pain now was tinged with resentment.

"I'm sure you'd have no difficulty in bearing any inconvenience that I had to suffer," she said.

"We're not going to get much further by saying disagreeable things to one another," he answered.

She gave a cry of despair. It was dreadful that she should love him so devotedly and yet feel such bitterness toward him. It was not possible that he understood how much he meant to her.

"Oh, Charlie, don't you know how I love you?"

"But, my dear, I love you. Only we're not living in a desert island and we've got to make the best we can out of the circumstances that are forced upon us. You really must be reasonable."

"How can I be reasonable? To me our love was everything and you were my whole life. It is not very pleasant to realise that to you it was only an episode."

"Of-course it wasn't an episode. But you know, when you ask me to get my wife, to whom I'm very much attached, to divorce me, and ruin my career by marrying you, you're asking a good deal."

"No more than I'm willing to do for you."

"The circumstances are rather different."

"The only difference is that you don't love me."

"One can be very much in love with a woman without wishing to spend the rest of one's life with her."

She gave him a quick look and despair seized her. Heavy tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Oh, how cruel! How can you be so heartless?"

She began to sob hysterically. He gave an anxious glance at the door.

"My dear, do try and control yourself."

"You don't know how I love you," she gasped. "I can't live without you. Have you no pity for me?"

She could not speak any more. She wept without restraint.

"I don't want to be unkind and, heaven knows, I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I must tell you the truth."

"It's the ruin of my whole life. Why couldn't you leave me alone? What harm had I ever done you?"

"Of course if it does you any good to put all the blame on me you may."

Kitty blazed with sudden anger.

"I suppose I threw myself at your head. I suppose I gave you no peace till you yielded to my entreaties."

"I don't say that. But I certainly should never have thought of making love to you if you hadn't made it perfectly clear that you were ready to be made love to."

Oh, the shame of it! She knew that what he said was true. His face now was sullen and worried and his hands moved uneasily. Every now and then he gave her a little glance of exasperation.

"Won't your husband forgive you?" he said after a while.

"I never asked him."

Instinctively he clenched his hands. She saw him suppress the exclamation of annoyance which came to his lips.

"Why don't you go to him and throw yourself on his mercy? If he's as much in love with you as you say he's bound to forgive you."

"How little you know him!"

CHAPTER XXVI

SHE wiped her eyes. She tried to pull herself together.

"Charlie, if you desert me I shall die."

She was driven now to appeal to his compassion. She ought to have told him at once. When he knew the horrible alternative that was placed before her his generosity, his sense of justice, his manliness, would be so vehemently aroused that he would think of nothing but her danger. Oh, how passionately she desired to feel his dear, protecting arms around her!

"Walter wants me to go to Mei-tan-fu."

"Oh, but that's the place where the cholera is. They've got the worst epidemic that they've had for fifty years. It's no place for a woman. You can't possibly go there."

"If you let me down I shall have to."

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"Walter is taking the place of the missionary doctor who died. He wants me to go with him."

"When?"

"Now. At once."

Townsend pushed back his chair and looked at her with puzzled eyes.

"I may be very stupid, but I can't make head or tail out of what you're saying. If he wants you to go to this place with him, what about a divorce?"

"He's given me my choice. I must either go to Mei-tan-fu or else he'll bring an action."

"Oh, I see." Townsend's tone changed ever so slightly. "I think that's rather decent of him, don't you?"

"Decent?"

"Well, it's a damned sporting thing of him to go there. It's not a thing I'd fancy. Of course he'll get a C.M.G. for it when he comes back."

"But me, Charlie?" she cried, with anguish in her voice.

"Well, I think if he wants you to go, under the circumstances I don't see how you can very well refuse."

"It means death. Absolutely certain death."

"Oh, damn it all, that's rather an exaggeration. He would hardly take you if he thought that. It's no more risk for you than for him. In point of fact there's no great risk if you're careful. I've been here when there's been cholera and I haven't turned a hair. The great thing is not to eat anything uncooked, no raw fruit or salads, or anything like that, and see that your drinking water is boiled." He was gaining confidence as he proceeded, and his speech was fluent; he was even becoming less sullen and more

alert; he was almost breezy. "After all, it's his job, isn't it? He's interested in bugs. It's rather a chance for him, if you come to think of it."

"But me, Charlie?" she repeated, not with anguish now, but with consternation.

"Well, the best way to understand a man is to put yourself in his shoes. From his point of view you've been rather a naughty little thing and he wants to get you out of harm's way. I always thought he never wanted to divorce you, he doesn't strike me as that sort of chap; but he made what he thought was a very generous offer and you put his back up by turning it down. I don't want to blame you, but really for all our sakes I think you ought to have given it a little consideration."

"But don't you see it'll kill me? Don't you know that he's taking me there because he *knows* it'll kill me."

"Oh, my dear, don't talk like that. We're in a damned awkward position and really it's no time to be melodramatic."

"You've made up your mind not to understand." Oh, the pain in her heart, and the fear! She could have screamed. "You can't send me to certain death. If you have no love or pity for me you must have just ordinary human feeling."

"I think it's rather hard on me to put it like that. As far as I can make out, your husband is behaving very generously. He's willing to forgive you if you'll let him. He wants to get you away and this opportunity has presented itself to take you to some place where for a few months you'll be out of harm's way. I don't pretend that Mei-tan-fu is a health resort, I never knew a Chinese city that was, but there's no reason to get the wind up about it. In fact that's the worst thing you can do. I believe as many people die from sheer fright in an epidemic as because they get infected."

"But I'm frightened now. When Walter spoke of it I almost fainted."

"At the first moment I can quite believe it was a shock, but when you come to look at it calmly you'll be all right. It'll be the sort of experience that not everyone has had."

"I thought, I thought . . ."

She rocked to and fro in an agony. He did not speak, and once more his face wore that sullen look which till lately she had never known. Kitty was not crying now. She was dry-eyed, calm, and though her voice was low it was steady.

"Do you want me to go?"

"It's Hobson's choice, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"It's only fair to you to tell you that if your husband brought an action for divorce and won it I should not be in a position to marry you."

It must have seemed an age to him before she answered. She rose slowly to her feet.

"I don't think that my husband ever thought of bringing an action."

"Then why in God's name have you been frightening me out of my wits?" he asked.

She looked at him coolly.

"He knew that you'd let me down."

She was silent. Vaguely, as when you are studying a foreign language and read a page which at first you can make nothing of, till a word or a sentence gives you a clue; and on a sudden a suspicion, as it were, of the sense flashes across your troubled wits—vaguely she gained an inkling into the workings of Walter's mind. It was like a dark and ominous landscape seen by a flash of lightning and in a moment hidden again by the night. She shuddered at what she saw.

"He made that threat only because he knew that you'd crumple up at it, Charlie. It's strange that he should have judged you so accurately. It was just like him to expose me to such a cruel disillusion."

Charlie looked down at the sheet of blotting paper in front of him. He was frowning a little and his mouth was sulky. But he did not reply.

"He knew that you were vain, cowardly and self-seeking. He wanted me to see it with my own eyes. He knew that you'd run like a hare at the approach of danger. He knew how grossly deceived I was in thinking that you were in love with me, because he knew that you were incapable of loving anyone but yourself. He knew you'd sacrifice me without a pang to save your own skin."

"If it really gives you any satisfaction to say beastly things to me I suppose I've got no right to complain. Women always are unfair and they generally manage to put a man in the wrong. But there is something to be said on the other side."

She took no notice of his interruption.

"And now I know all that he knew. I know that you're callous

and heartless, I know that you're selfish—selfish beyond words, and I know that you haven't the nerve of a rabbit, I know you're a liar and a humbug, I know that you're utterly contemptible. And the tragic part is"—her face was on a sudden distraught with pain—"the tragic part is that notwithstanding I love you with all my heart."

"Kitty."

She gave a bitter laugh. He had spoken her name in that melting, rich tone of his which came to him so naturally and meant so little.

"You fool," she said.

He drew back quickly, flushing and offended; he could not make her out. She gave him a look in which there was a glint of amusement.

"You're beginning to dislike me, aren't you? Well, dislike me. It doesn't make any difference to me now."

She began to put on her gloves.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Oh, don't be afraid, you'll come to no harm. You'll be quite safe."

"For God's sake, don't talk like that, Kitty," he answered and his deep voice rang with anxiety. "You must know that everything that concerns you concerns me. I shall be frightfully anxious to know what happens. What are you going to say to your husband?"

"I'm going to tell him that I'm prepared to go to Mei-tan-fu with him."

"Perhaps when you consent he won't insist."

He could not have known why, when he said this, she looked at him so strangely.

"You're not really frightened?" he asked her.

"No," she said. "You've inspired me with courage. To go into the midst of a cholera epidemic will be a unique experience and if I die, it—well, I die."

"I was trying to be as kind to you as I could."

She looked at him again. Tears sprang into her eyes once more and her heart was very full. The impulse was almost irresistible to fling herself on his breast and crush her lips against his. It was no use.

"If you want to know," she said, trying to keep her voice steady, "I go with death in my heart and fear. I do not know what Walter has in that dark, twisted mind of his, but I'm shaking

with terror. I think it may be that death will be really a release."

She felt that she could not hold on to her self-control for another moment. She walked swiftly to the door and let herself out before he had time to move from his chair. Townsend gave a long sigh of relief. He badly wanted a brandy and soda.

CHAPTER XXVII

WALTER was in when she got home. She would have liked to go straight to her room, but he was downstairs, in the hall, giving instructions to one of the boys. She was so wretched that she welcomed the humiliation to which she must expose herself. She stopped and faced him.

"I'm coming with you to that place," she said.

"Oh, good."

"When do you want me to be ready?"

"To-morrow night."

She did not know what spirit of bravado entered into her. His indifference was like the prick of a spear. She said a thing that surprised herself.

"I suppose I needn't take more than a few summer things and a shroud, need I?"

She was watching his face and knew that her flippancy angered him.

"I've already told your amah what you'll want."

She nodded and went up to her room. She was very pale.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THEY were reaching their destination at last. They were borne in chairs, day after day, along a narrow causeway between interminable rice-fields. They set out at dawn and travelled till the heat of the day forced them to take shelter in a wayside inn and then went on again till they reached the town where they had arranged to spend the night. Kitty's chair headed the procession and Walter followed her; then in a struggling line came the coolies that bore their bedding, stores and equipment. Kitty passed through the

country with unseeing eyes. All through the long hours, the silence broken only by an occasional remark from one of the bearers or a snatch of uncouth song, she turned over in her tortured mind the details of that heart-rending scene in Charlie's office. Recalling what he had said to her and what she had said to him, she was dismayed to see what an arid and business-like turn their conversation had taken. She had not said what she wanted to say and she had not spoken in the tone she intended. Had she been able to make him see her boundless love, the passion in her heart, and her helplessness, he could never have been so inhuman as to leave her to her fate. She had been taken unawares. She could hardly believe her ears when he told her, more clearly than with words, that he cared nothing for her. That was why she had not even cried very much, she had been so dazed. She had wept since, wept miserably.

At night in the inns, sharing the principal guest-chamber with her husband and conscious that Walter, lying on his camp bed, a few feet away from her, lay awake, she dug her teeth in the pillow so that no sound might escape her. But in the day-time, protected by the curtains of her chair, she allowed herself to give way. Her pain was so great that she could have screamed at the top of her voice; she had never known that one could suffer so much; and she asked herself desperately what she had done to deserve it. She could not make out why Charlie did not love her: it was her fault, she supposed, but she had done everything she knew to make him fond of her. They had always got on so well, they laughed all the time they were together, they were not only lovers but good friends. She could not understand; she was broken. She told herself that she hated and despised him; but she had no idea how she was going to live if she was never to see him again. If Walter was taking her to Mei-tan-fu as a punishment he was making a fool of himself, for what did she care now what became of her? She had nothing to live for any more. It was rather hard to be finished with life at twenty-seven.

CHAPTER XXIX

ON the steamer that took them up the Western River Walter read incessantly, but at meal-times he endeavoured to make some kind

of conversation. He talked to her as though she were a stranger with whom he happened to be making the journey, of indifferent things, from politeness, Kitty imagined, or because so he could render more marked the gulf that separated them.

In a flash of insight she had told Charlie that Walter had sent her to him with the threat of divorce as the alternative to her accompanying him to the stricken city in order that she might see for herself how indifferent, cowardly and selfish he was. It was true. It was a trick which accorded very well with his sardonic humour. He knew exactly what would happen and he had given her amah necessary instructions before her return. She had caught in his eyes a disdain which seemed to include her lover as well as herself. He said to himself, perhaps, that if he had been in Townsend's place nothing in the world would have hindered him from making any sacrifice to gratify her smallest whim. She knew that was true also. But then, when her eyes were opened, how could he make her do something which was so dangerous, and which he must know frightened her so terribly? At first she thought he was only playing with her, and till they actually started—no, later, till they left the river and took to the chairs for the journey across-country, she thought he would give that little laugh of his and tell her that she need not come. She had no inkling what was in his mind. He could not really desire her death. He had loved her so desperately. She knew what love was now and she remembered a thousand signs of his adoration. For him really, in the French phrase, she did make fine weather and foul. It was impossible that he did not love her still. Did you cease to love a person because you had been treated cruelly? She had not made him suffer as Charlie had made her suffer and yet, if Charlie made a sign, notwithstanding everything, even though she knew him now, she would abandon all the world had to offer and fly to his arms. Even though he had sacrificed her and cared nothing for her, even though he was callous and unkind, she loved him.

At first she thought that she had only to bide her time, and sooner or later Walter would forgive her. She had been too confident of her power over him to believe that it was gone for ever. Many waters could not quench love. He was weak if he loved her, and felt that love her he must. But now she was not quite sure. When in the evening he sat reading in the straight-backed black-wood chair of the inn with the light of a hurricane lamp on his face she was able to watch him at her ease. She lay on

the pallet on which her bed presently would be set and she was in shadow. Those straight, regular features of his made his face look very severe. You could hardly believe that it was possible for them on occasion to be changed by so sweet a smile. He was able to read as calmly as though she were a thousand miles away; she saw him turn the pages and she saw his eyes move regularly as they travelled from line to line. He was not thinking of her. And when, the table being set and dinner brought in, he put aside his book and gave her a glance (not knowing how the light on his face threw into distinctness his expression), she was startled to see in his eyes a look of physical distaste. Yes, it startled her. Was it possible that his love had left him entirely? Was it possible that he really designed her death? It was absurd. That would be the act of a madman. It was odd, the little shiver that ran through her as the thought occurred to her that perhaps Walter was not quite sane.

CHAPTER XXX

SUDDENLY her bearers, long silent, began to speak and one of them, turning round, with words she could not understand and with a gesture, sought to attract her attention. She looked in the direction he pointed and there, on the top of a hill, saw an archway; she knew by now that it was a memorial in compliment of a fortunate scholar or a virtuous widow, she had passed many of them since they left the river; but this one, silhouetted against the westering sun, was more fantastic and beautiful than any she had seen. Yet, she knew not why, it made her uneasy; it had a significance which she felt but could not put into words: was it a menace that she vaguely discerned or was it derision? She was passing a grove of bamboos and they leaned over the causeway strangely as if they would detain her; though the summer evening was windless their narrow green leaves shivered a little. It gave her the sensation that someone hidden among them was watching her as she passed. Now they came to the foot of the hill and the rice-fields ceased. The bearers took it with a swinging stride. The hill was covered close with little green mounds, close, close to one another, so that the ground was ribbed like the sea-sand when the tide has gone out; and this she knew too, for she had passed just such a spot as they approached each populous city and left it. It

was the graveyard. Now she knew why the bearers had called her attention to the archway that stood on the crest of the hill: they had reached the end of their journey.

They passed through the archway and the chair-bearers paused to change the pole from shoulder to shoulder. One of them wiped his sweating face with a dirty rag. The causeway wound down. There were bedraggled houses on each side. Now the night was falling. But the bearers on a sudden broke into excited talk and with a jump that shook her ranged themselves as near as they could to the wall. In a moment she knew what had startled them, for as they stood there, chattering to one another, four peasants passed, quick and silent, bearing a new coffin, unpainted, and its fresh wood gleamed white in the approaching darkness. Kitty felt her heart beat in terror against her ribs. The coffin passed, but the bearers stood still; it seemed as though they could not summon up the will to go on. But there was a shout from behind and they started. They did not speak now.

They walked for a few minutes longer and then turned sharply into an open gateway. The chair was set down. She had arrived.

CHAPTER XXXI

It was a bungalow and she entered the sitting-room. She sat down while the coolies, straggling in one by one, brought in their loads. Walter in the courtyard gave directions where this or that was to be placed. She was very tired. She was startled to hear an unknown voice.

"May I come in?"

She flushed and grew pale. She was overwrought and it made her nervous to meet a stranger. A man came out of the darkness, for the long, low room was lit only by a shaded lamp, and held out his hand:

"My name is Waddington. I am the Deputy Commissioner."

"Oh, the Customs. I know. I heard that you were here."

In that dim light she could see only that he was a little thin man, no taller than she, with a bald head and a small, bare face.

"I live just at the bottom of the hill, but coming in this way you wouldn't have seen my house. I thought you'd be too fagged to

come and dine with me, so I've ordered your dinner here and I've invited myself."

"I'm delighted to hear it."

"You'll find the cook's not bad. I kept on Watson's boys for you."

"Watson was the missionary who was here?"

"Yes. Very nice fellow. I'll show you his grave to-morrow if you like."

"How kind you are," said Kitty, with a smile.

At that moment Walter came in. Waddington had introduced himself to him before coming in to see Kitty and now he said:

"I've just been breaking it to your missus that I'm dining with you. Since Watson died I haven't had anybody much to talk to but the nuns, and I can never do myself justice in French. Besides, there is only a limited number of subjects you can talk to them about."

"I've just told the boy to bring in some drinks," said Walter.

The servant brought whisky and soda and Kitty noticed that Waddington helped himself generously. His manner of speaking and his easy chuckle had suggested to her when he came in that he was not quite sober.

"Here's luck," he said. Then, turning to Walter: "You've got your work cut out for you here. They're dying like flies. The magistrate's lost his head and Colonel Yü, the officer commanding the troops, is having a devil of a job to prevent them from looting. If something doesn't happen soon we shall all be murdered in our beds. I tried to get the nuns to go, but of course they wouldn't. They all want to be martyrs, damn them."

He spoke lightly and there was in his voice a sort of ghostly laughter so that you could not listen to him without smiling.

"Why haven't you gone?" asked Walter.

"Well, I've lost half my staff and the others are ready to lie down and die at any minute. Somebody's got to stay and keep things together."

"Have you been inoculated?"

"Yes. Watson did me. But he did himself too, and it didn't do him much good, poor blighter." He turned to Kitty and his funny little face was gaily puckered. "I don't think there's any great risk if you take proper precautions. Have your milk and water boiled and don't eat fresh fruit or uncooked vegetables. Have you brought any gramophone records with you?"

"No, I don't think so," said Kitty.

"I'm sorry for that. I was hoping you would. I haven't had any for a long time and I'm sick of my old ones."

The boy came in to ask if they would have dinner.

"You won't dress to-night, will you?" asked Waddington. "My boy died last week and the boy I have now is a fool, so I haven't been dressing in the evening."

"I'll go and take off my hat," said Kitty.

Her room was next door to that in which they sat. It was barely furnished. An amah was kneeling on the floor, the lamp beside her, unpacking Kitty's things.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE dining-room was small and the greater part of it was filled by an immense table. On the walls were engravings of scenes from the Bible and illuminated texts.

"Missionaries always have large dining-tables," Waddington explained. "They get so much a year more for every child they have and they buy their tables when they marry so that there shall be plenty of room for little strangers."

From the ceiling hung a large paraffin-lamp, so that Kitty was able to see better what sort of a man Waddington was. His baldness had deceived her into thinking him no longer young, but she saw now that he must be well under forty. His face, small under a high, rounded forehead, was unlined and fresh-coloured; it was ugly like a monkey's, but with an ugliness that was not without charm; it was an amusing face. His features, his nose and his mouth, were hardly larger than a child's, and he had small, very bright blue eyes. His eyebrows were fair and scanty. He looked like a funny little old boy. He helped himself constantly to liquor and as dinner proceeded it became evident that he was far from sober. But if he was drunk it was without offensiveness, gaily, as a satyr might be who had stolen a wine-skin from a sleeping shepherd.

He talked of Hong-Kong; he had many friends there and he wanted to know about them. He had been down for the races a year before and he talked of ponies and their owners.

"By the way, what about Townsend?" he asked suddenly. "Is he going to become Colonial Secretary?"

Kitty felt herself flush, but her husband did not look at her.

"I shouldn't wonder," he answered.

"He's the sort that gets on."

"Do you know him?" asked Walter.

"Yes, I know him pretty well. We travelled out from home together once."

From the other side of the river they heard the beating of gongs and the clatter of fire-crackers. There, so short a way from them, the great city lay in terror; and death, sudden and ruthless, hurried through its tortuous streets. But Waddington began to speak of London. He talked of the theatres. He knew everything that was being played at the moment and he told them what pieces he had seen when he was last home on leave. He laughed as he recollected the humour of this low comedian and sighed as he reflected on the beauty of that star of musical comedy. He was pleased to be able to boast that a cousin of his had married one of the most celebrated. He had lunched with her and she had given him her photograph. He would show it to them when they came and dined with him at the Customs.

Walter looked at his guest with a cold and ironic gaze, but he was evidently not a little amused by him, and he made an effort to show a civil interest in topics of which Kitty was well aware he knew nothing. A faint smile lingered on his lips. But Kitty, she knew not why, was filled with awe. In the house of that dead missionary, over against the stricken city, they seemed immeasurably apart from all the world. Three solitary creatures and strangers to each other.

Dinner was finished and she rose from the table.

"Do you mind if I say good-night to you? I'm going to bed."

"I'll take myself off, I expect the doctor wants to go to bed too," answered Waddington. "We must be out early to-morrow."

He shook hands with Kitty. He was quite steady on his feet, but his eyes were shining more than ever.

"I'll come and fetch you," he told Walter, "and take you to see the magistrate and Colonel Yü, and then we'll go along to the Convent. You've got your work cut out, I can tell you."

CHAPTER XXXIII

HER night was tortured with strange dreams. She seemed to be carried in her chair and she felt the swaying motion as the bearers marched with their long, uneven stride. She entered cities, vast and dim, where the multitude thronged about her with curious eyes. The streets were narrow and tortuous and in the open shops, with their strange wares, all traffic stopped as she went by, and those who bought and those who sold paused. Then she came to the memorial arch and its fantastic outline seemed on a sudden to gain a monstrous life; its capricious contours were like the waving arms of a Hindu god, and, as she passed under it, she heard the echo of mocking laughter. But then Charlie Townsend came towards her and took her in his arms, lifting her out of the chair, and said it was all a mistake, he had never meant to treat her as he had, for he loved her and he couldn't live without her. She felt his kisses on her mouth and she wept with joy, asking him why he had been so cruel, but though she asked she knew it did not matter. And then there was a hoarse, abrupt cry and they were separated, and between, hurrying silently, coolies passed in their ragged blue and they bore a coffin.

She awoke with a start.

The bungalow stood half-way down a steep hill and from her window she saw the narrow river below her and, opposite, the city. The dawn had just broken and from the river rose a white mist shrouding the junks that lay moored close to one another like peas in a pod. There were hundreds of them, and they were silent, mysterious in that ghostly light, and you had a feeling that their crews lay under an enchantment, for it seemed that it was not sleep, but something strange and terrible, that held them so still and mute.

The morning drew on and the sun touched the mist so that it shone whitely like the ghost of snow on a dying star. Though on the river it was light so that you could discern palely the lines of the crowded junks and the thick forest of their masts, in front it was a shining wall the eye could not pierce. But suddenly from that white cloud a tall, grim and massive bastion emerged. It seemed not merely to be made visible by the all-discovering sun but rather to rise out of nothing at the touch of a magic wand. It towered, the stronghold of a cruel and barbaric race, over the

river. But the magician who built worked swiftly and now a fragment of coloured wall crowned the bastion; in a moment, out of the mist, looming vastly and touched here and there by a yellow ray of sun, there was seen a cluster of green and yellow roofs. Huge they seemed and you could make out no pattern; the order, if order there was, escaped you; wayward and extravagant, but of an unimaginable richness. This was no fortress, nor a temple, but the magic palace of some emperor of the gods where no man might enter. It was too airy, fantastic and unsubstantial to be the work of human hands; it was the fabric of a dream.

The tears ran down Kitty's face and she gazed, her hands clasped to her breast, and her mouth, for she was breathless, open a little. She had never felt so light of heart and it seemed to her as though her body were a shell that lay at her feet and she pure spirit. Here was Beauty. She took it as the believer takes in his mouth the wafer which is God.

CHAPTER XXXIV

SINCE Walter went out early in the morning, came back at tiffin only for half an hour, and did not then return till dinner was just ready, Kitty found herself much alone. For some days she did not stir from the bungalow. It was very hot and for the most part she lay in a long chair by the open window, trying to read. The hard light of mid-day had robbed the magic palace of its mystery and now it was no more than a temple on the city wall, garish and shabby, but because she had seen it once in such an ecstasy it was never again quite commonplace; and often at dawn or at dusk, and again at night, she found herself able to recapture something of that beauty. What had seemed to her a mighty bastion was but the city wall and on this, massive and dark, her eyes rested continually. Behind its crenellations lay the city in the dread grip of the pestilence.

Vaguely she knew that terrible things were happening there, not from Walter, who when she questioned him (for otherwise he rarely spoke to her) answered with a humorous nonchalance which sent a shiver down her spine; but from Waddington and from the amah. The people were dying at the rate of a hundred a day, and hardly any of those who were attacked by the disease recovered

from it; the gods had been brought out from the abandoned temples and placed in the streets; offerings were laid before them and sacrifices made, but they did not stay the plague. The people died so fast that it was hardly possible to bury them. In some houses the whole family had been swept away and there was none to perform the funeral rights. The officer commanding the troops was a masterful man and if the city was not given over to riot and arson it was due to his determination. He forced his soldiers to bury such as there was no one else to bury and he had shot with his own hand an officer who demurred at entering a stricken house.

Kitty sometimes was so frightened that her heart sank within her and she would tremble in every limb. It was all very well to say that the risk was small if you took reasonable precautions: she was panic-stricken. She turned over in her mind crazy plans of escape. To get away, just to get away, she was prepared to set out as she was and make her way alone, without anything but what she stood up in, to some place of safety. She thought of throwing herself on the mercy of Waddington, telling him everything and beseeching him to help her to get back to Hong-Kong. If she flung herself on her knees before her husband, and admitted that she was frightened, frightened, even though he hated her now he must have enough human feeling in him to pity her.

It was out of the question. If she went, where could she go? Not to her mother; her mother would make her see very plainly that, having married her off, she counted on being rid of her; and besides she did not want to go to her mother. She wanted to go to Charlie, and he did not want her. She knew what he would say if she suddenly appeared before him. She saw the sullen look of his face and the shrewd hardness behind his charming eyes. It would be difficult for him to find words that sounded well. She clenched her hands. She would have given anything to humiliate him as he had humiliated her. Sometimes she was seized with such a frenzy that she wished she had let Walter divorce her, ruining herself if only she could have ruined him too. Certain things he had said to her made her blush with shame when she recalled them.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE first time she was alone with Waddington she brought the conversation round to Charlie. Waddington had spoken of him on the evening of their arrival. She pretended that he was no more than an acquaintance of her husband.

"I never much cared for him," said Waddington. "I've always thought him a bore."

"You must be very hard to please," returned Kitty, in the bright, chaffing way she could assume so easily. "I suppose he's far and away the most popular man in Hong-Kong."

"I know. That is his stock-in-trade. He's made a science of popularity. He has the gift of making everyone he meets feel that he is the one person in the world he wants to see. He's always ready to do a service that isn't any trouble to himself, and even if he doesn't do what you want he manages to give you the impression that it's only because it's not humanly possible."

"That is surely an attractive trait."

"Charm and nothing but charm at last grows a little tiresome, I think. It's a relief then to deal with a man who isn't quite so delightful but a little more sincere. I've known Charlie Townsend for a good many years and once or twice I've caught him with the mask off—you see, I never mattered, just a subordinate official in the Customs—and I know that he doesn't in his heart give a damn for anyone in the world but himself."

Kitty, lounging easily in her chair, looked at him with smiling eyes. She turned her wedding-ring round and round her finger.

"Of course he'll get on. He knows all the official ropes. Before I die I have every belief that I shall address him as Your Excellency and stand up when he enters the room."

"Most people think he deserves to get on. He's generally supposed to have a great deal of ability."

"Ability? What nonsense! He's a very stupid man. He gives you the impression that he dashes off his work and gets it through from sheer brilliancy. Nothing of the kind. He's as industrious as a Eurasian clerk."

"How has he got the reputation of being so clever?"

"There are many foolish people in the world and when a man in a rather high position puts on no frills, slaps them on the back, and tells them he'll do anything in the world for them, they are

very likely to think him clever. And then, of course, there's his wife. There's an able woman if you like. She has a good sound head and her advice is always worth taking. As long as Charlie Townsend's got her to depend on he's pretty safe never to do a foolish thing, and that's the first thing necessary for a man to get on in Government service. They don't want clever men; clever men have ideas, and ideas cause trouble; they want men who have charm and tact and who can be counted on never to make a blunder. Oh, yes, Charlie Townsend will get to the top of the tree all right."

"I wonder why you dislike him?"

"I don't dislike him."

"But you like his wife better?" smiled Kitty.

"I'm an old-fashioned little man and I like a well-bred woman."

"I wish she were well-dressed as well as well-bred."

"Doesn't she dress well? I never noticed."

"I've always heard that they were a devoted couple," said Kitty, watching him through her eyelashes.

"He's very fond of her: I will give him that credit. I think that is the most decent thing about him."

"Cold praise."

"He has his little flirtations, but they're not serious. He's much too cunning to let them go to such lengths as might cause him inconvenience. And of course he isn't a passionate man; he's only a vain one. He likes admiration. He's fat and forty now, he does himself too well, but he was very good-looking when he first came to the Colony. I've often heard his wife chaff him about his conquests."

"She doesn't take his flirtations very seriously?"

"Oh, no, she knows they don't go very far. She says she'd like to be able to make friends of the poor little things who fall to Charlie; but they're always so common. She says it's really not very flattering to her that the women who fall in love with her husband are so uncommonly second-rate."

CHAPTER XXXVI

WHEN Waddington left her Kitty thought over what he had so carelessly said. It hadn't been very pleasant to hear and she had

had to make something of an effort not to show how much it touched her. It was bitter to think that all he said was true. She knew that Charlie was stupid and vain, hungry for flattery, and she remembered the complacency with which he had told her little stories to prove his cleverness. He was proud of a low cunning. How worthless must she be if she had given her heart so passionately to such a man because—because he had nice eyes and a good figure! She wished to despise him, because so long as she only hated him she knew that she was very near loving him. The way he had treated her should have opened her eyes. Walter had always held him in contempt. Oh, if she could only get him out of her mind altogether! And had his wife chaffed him about her obvious infatuation for him? Dorothy would have liked to make a friend of her, but that she found her second-rate. Kitty smiled a little: how indignant her mother would be to know that her daughter was considered that!

But at night she dreamt of him again. She felt his arms pressing her close and the hot passion of his kisses on her lips. What did it matter if he was fat and forty? She laughed with soft affection because he minded so much; she loved him all the more for his childlike vanity and she could be sorry for him and comfort him. When she awoke tears were streaming from her eyes.

She did not know why it seemed to her so tragic to cry in her sleep.

CHAPTER XXXVII

SHE saw Waddington every day, for he strolled up the hill to the Fanes' bungalow when his day's work was done; and so after a week they had arrived at an intimacy which under other circumstances they could scarcely have achieved in a year. Once when Kitty told him she didn't know what she would do there without him he answered, laughing:

"You see, you and I are the only people here who walk quite quietly and peaceably on solid ground. The nuns walk in heaven and your husband—in darkness."

Though she gave a careless laugh she wondered what he meant. She felt that his merry little blue eyes were scanning her face with an amiable, but disconcerting attention. She had discovered already that he was shrewd and she had a feeling that the relations

between herself and Walter excited his cynical curiosity. She found a certain amusement in baffling him. She liked him and she knew that he was kindly disposed toward her. He was not witty nor brilliant, but he had a dry and incisive way of putting things which was diverting, and his funny, boyish face under that bald skull, all screwed up with laughter, made his remarks sometimes extremely droll. He had lived for many years in outposts, often with no man of his own colour to talk to, and his personality had developed in eccentric freedom. He was full of fads and oddities. His frankness was refreshing. He seemed to look upon life in a spirit of banter, and his ridicule of the Colony at Hong-Kong was acid; but he laughed also at the Chinese officials in Mei-tan-fu and at the cholera which decimated the city. He could not tell a tragic story or one of heroism without making it faintly absurd. He had many anecdotes of his adventures during twenty years in China, and you concluded from them that the earth was a very grotesque, bizarre and ludicrous place.

Though he denied that he was a Chinese scholar (he swore that the Sinologists were as mad as march hares) he spoke the language with ease. He read little and what he knew he had learned from conversation. But he often told Kitty stories from the Chinese novels and from Chinese history and though he told them with that airy badinage which was natural to him it was good-humoured and even tender. It seemed to her that, perhaps unconsciously, he had adopted the Chinese view that the Europeans were barbarians and their life a folly: in China alone was it so led that a sensible man might discern in it a sort of reality. Here was food for reflection: Kitty had never heard the Chinese spoken of as anything but decadent, dirty and unspeakable. It was as though the corner of a curtain were lifted for a moment, and she caught a glimpse of a world rich with a colour and significance she had not dreamt of.

He sat there, talking, laughing and drinking.

"Don't you think you drink too much?" said Kitty to him boldly.

"It's my great pleasure in life," he answered. "Besides, it keeps the cholera out."

When he left her he was generally drunk, but he carried his liquor well. It made him hilarious, but not disagreeable.

One evening Walter, coming back earlier than usual, asked him to stay to dinner. A curious incident happened. They had their

soup and their fish and then with the chicken a fresh green salad was handed to Kitty by the boy.

"Good God, you're not going to eat that!" cried Waddington, as he saw Kitty take some.

"Yes, we have it every night."

"My wife likes it," said Walter.

The dish was handed to Waddington, but he shook his head.

"Thank you very much, but I'm not thinking of committing suicide just yet."

Walter smiled grimly and helped himself. Waddington said nothing more, in fact he became strangely taciturn, and soon after dinner he left them.

It was true that they ate salad every night. Two days after their arrival the cook, with the unconcern of the Chinese, had sent it in and Kitty, without thinking, took some. Walter leaned forward quickly.

"You oughtn't to eat that. The boy's crazy to serve it."

"Why not?" asked Kitty, looking at him full in the face.

"It's always dangerous, it's madness now. You'll kill yourself."

"I thought that was the idea," said Kitty.

She began to eat it coolly. She was seized with she knew not what spirit of bravado. She watched Walter with mocking eyes. She thought that he grew a trifle pale, but when the salad was handed to him he helped himself. The cook, finding they did not refuse it, sent them some in every day, and every day, courting death, they ate it. It was grotesque to take such a risk. Kitty, in terror of the disease, took it with the feeling not only that she was thus maliciously avenging herself on Walter, but that she was flouting her own desperate fears.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

It was the day after this that Waddington, coming to the bungalow in the afternoon, when he had sat a little asked Kitty if she would not go for a stroll with him. She had not been out of the compound since their arrival. She was glad enough.

"There are not many walks, I'm afraid," he said. "But we'll go to the top of the hill."

"Oh, yes, where the archway is. I've seen it often from the terrace."

One of the boys opened the heavy doorway for them and they stepped out into the dusty lane. They walked a few yards and then Kitty, seizing Waddington's arm in fright, gave a startled cry.

"Look!"

"What's the matter?"

At the foot of the wall that surrounded the compound a man lay on his back with his legs stretched out and his arms thrown over his head. He wore the patched blue rags and the wild mop of hair of the Chinese beggar.

"He looks as if he were dead," Kitty gasped.

"He is dead. Come along; you'd better look the other way. I'll have him moved when we come back."

But Kitty was trembling so violently that she could not stir.

"I've never seen anyone dead before."

"You'd better hurry up and get used to it, then, because you'll see a good many before you've done with this cheerful spot."

He took her hand and drew it in his arm. They walked for a little in silence.

"Did he die of cholera?" she said at last.

"I suppose so."

They walked up the hill till they came to the archway. It was richly carved. Fantastic and ironical it stood like a landmark in the surrounding country. They sat down on the pedestal and faced the wide plain. The hill was sown close with the little green mounds of the dead, not in lines but disorderly, so that you felt that beneath the surface they must strangely jostle one another. The narrow causeway meandered sinuously among the green rice-fields. A small boy seated on the neck of a water-buffalo drove it slowly home, and three peasants in wide straw hats lolloped with sidelong gait under their heavy loads. After the heat of the day it was pleasant in that spot to catch the faint breeze of the evening and the wide expanse of country brought a sense of restful melancholy to the tortured heart. But Kitty could not rid her mind of the dead beggar.

"How can you talk and laugh and drink whisky when people are dying all around you?" she asked suddenly.

Waddington did not answer. He turned round and looked at her, then he put his hand on her arm.

"You know, this is no place for a woman," he said gravely. "Why don't you go?"

She gave him a sidelong glance from beneath her long lashes and there was the shadow of a smile on her lips.

"I should have thought under the circumstances a wife's place was by her husband's side."

"When they telegraphed to me that you were coming with Fane I was astonished. But then it occurred to me that perhaps you'd been a nurse and all this sort of thing was in the day's work. I expected you to be one of those grim-visaged females who lead you a dog's life when you're ill in hospital. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I came into the bungalow and saw you sitting down and resting. You looked very frail and white and tired."

"You couldn't expect me to look my best after nine days on the road."

"You look frail and white and tired now, and, if you'll allow me to say so, desperately unhappy."

Kitty flushed because she could not help it, but she was able to give a laugh that sounded merry enough.

"I'm sorry you don't like my expression. The only reason I have for looking unhappy is that since I was twelve I've known that my nose was a little too long. But to cherish a secret sorrow is a most effective pose: you can't think how many sweet young men have wanted to console me."

Waddington's blue and shining eyes rested on her and she knew that he did not believe a word she said. She did not care so long as he pretended to.

"I knew that you hadn't been married very long and I came to the conclusion that you and your husband were madly in love with each other. I couldn't believe that he had wished you to come, but perhaps you had absolutely refused to stay behind."

"That's a very reasonable explanation," she said lightly.

"Yes, but it isn't the right one."

She waited for him to go on, fearful of what he was about to say, for she had a pretty good idea of his shrewdness and was aware that he never hesitated to speak his mind, but unable to resist the desire to hear him talk about herself.

"I don't think for a moment that you're in love with your husband. I think you dislike him, I shouldn't be surprised if you hated him. But I'm quite sure you're afraid of him."

For a moment she looked away. She did not mean to let Waddington see that anything he said affected her.

"I have a suspicion that you don't very much like my husband," she said with cool irony.

"I respect him. He has brains and character; and that, I may tell you, is a very unusual combination. I don't suppose you know what he is doing here, because I don't think he's very expansive with you. If any man single-handed can put a stop to this frightful epidemic he's going to do it. He's doctoring the sick, cleaning the city up, trying to get the drinking-water pure. He doesn't mind where he goes nor what he does. He's risking his life twenty times a day. He's got Colonel Yü in his pocket and he's induced him to put the troops at his disposal. He's even put a little pluck into the magistrate and the old man is really trying to do something. And the nuns at the convent swear by him. They think he's a hero."

"Don't you?"

"After all this isn't his job, is it? He's a bacteriologist. There was no call for him to come here. He doesn't give me the impression that he's moved by compassion for all these dying Chinamen. Watson was different. He loved the human race. Though he was a missionary it didn't make any difference to him if they were Christian, Buddhist or Confucian; they were just human beings. Your husband isn't here because he cares a damn if a hundred thousand Chinese die of cholera; he isn't here either in the interests of science. Why is he here?"

"You'd better ask him."

"It interests me to see you together. I sometimes wonder how you behave when you're alone. When I'm there you're acting, both of you, and acting damned badly, by George. You'd neither of you get thirty bob a week in a touring company if that's the best you can do."

"I don't know what you mean," smiled Kitty, keeping up a pretence of frivolity which she knew did not deceive.

"You're a very pretty woman. It's funny that your husband should never look at you. When he speaks to you it sounds as though it were not his voice but somebody else's."

"Do you think he doesn't love me?" asked Kitty in a low voice, hoarsely, putting aside suddenly her lightness.

"I don't know. I don't know if you fill him with such a repulsion that it gives him goose-flesh to be near you or if he's burning with a love that for some reason he will not allow himself

to show. I've asked myself if you're both here to commit suicide."

Kitty had seen the startled glance and then the scrutinising look Waddington gave them when the incident of the salad took place.

"I think you're attaching too much importance to a few lettuce leaves," she said flippantly. She rose. "Shall we go home? I'm sure you want a whisky and soda."

"You're not a heroine at all events. You're frightened to death. Are you sure you don't want to go away?"

"What has it got to do with you?"

"I'll help you."

"Are you going to fall to my look of secret sorrow? Look at my profile and tell me if my nose isn't a trifle too long."

He gazed at her reflectively, that malicious, ironical look in his bright eyes, but mingled with it, a shadow, like a tree standing at a river's edge and its reflection in the water, was an expression of singular kindness. It brought sudden tears to Kitty's eyes.

"Must you stay?"

"Yes."

They passed under the flamboyant archway and walked down the hill. When they came to the compound they saw the body of the dead beggar. He took her arm, but she released herself. She stood still.

"It's dreadful, isn't it?"

"What? Death."

"Yes. It makes everything else seem so horribly trivial. He doesn't look human. When you look at him you can hardly persuade yourself that he's ever been alive. It's hard to think that not so very many years ago he was just a little boy tearing down the hill and flying a kite."

She could not hold back the sob that choked her.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A FEW days later Waddington, sitting with Kitty, a long glass of whisky and soda in his hand, began to speak to her of the convent.

"The Mother Superior is a very remarkable woman," he said.

"The Sisters tell me that she belongs to one of the greatest families in France, but they won't tell me which; the Mother Superior, they say, doesn't wish it to be talked of."

"Why don't you ask her, if it interests you?" smiled Kitty.

"If you knew her you'd know it was impossible to ask her an indiscreet question."

"She must certainly be very remarkable if she can impress you with awe."

"I am the bearer of a message from her to you. She has asked me to say that, though of course you may not wish to adventure into the very centre of the epidemic, if you do not mind that it will give her great pleasure to show you the convent."

"It's very kind of her. I shouldn't have thought she was aware of my existence."

"I've spoken about you; I go there two or three times a week just now to see if there's anything I can do; and I dare say your husband has told them about you. You must be prepared to find that they have an unbounded admiration for him."

"Are you a Catholic?"

His malicious eyes twinkled and his funny little face was puckered with laughter.

"Why are you grinning at me?" asked Kitty.

"Can any good come out of Galilee? No, I'm not a Catholic. I describe myself as a member of the Church of England, which I suppose is an inoffensive way of saying that you don't believe in anything very much. . . . When the Mother Superior came here ten years ago she brought seven nuns with her and of those all but three are dead. You see, at the best of times, Mei-tan-fu is not a health resort. They live in the very middle of the city, in the poorest district, they work very hard and they never have a holiday."

"But are there only three and the Mother Superior now?"

"Oh, no, more have taken their places. There are six of them now. When one of them died of cholera at the beginning of the epidemic two others came up from Canton."

Kitty shivered a little.

"Are you cold?"

"No, it was only someone walking over my grave."

"When they leave France they leave it for ever. They're not like the Protestant missionaries who have a year's leave every now and then. I always think that must be the hardest thing of all. We English have no very strong attachment to the soil, we can make ourselves at home in any part of the world, but the French, I think, have an attachment to their country which is almost a physical bond. They're never really at ease when they're out of it. It

always seems to me very moving that these women should make just that sacrifice. I suppose if I *were* a Catholic it would seem very natural to me."

Kitty looked at him coolly. She could not quite understand the emotion with which the little man spoke and she asked herself whether it was a pose. He had drunk a good deal of whisky and perhaps he was not quite sober.

"Come and see for yourself," he said, with his bantering smile, quickly reading her thought. "It's not nearly so risky as eating a tomato."

"If you're not frightened there's no reason why I should be."

"I think it'll amuse you. It's like a little bit of France."

CHAPTER XL

THEY crossed the river in a sampan. A chair was waiting for Kitty at the landing-stage and she was carried up the hill to the water-gate. It was through this that the coolies came to fetch water from the river and they hurried to and fro with huge buckets hanging from the yoke on their shoulder, splashing the causeway so that it was as wet as though it had heavily rained. Kitty's bearers gave short, sharp cries to urge them to make way.

"Of course all business is at a standstill," said Waddington, walking by her side. "Under normal circumstances you have to fight your way through the coolies carrying loads up and down to the junks."

The street was narrow and winding so that Kitty lost all sense of the direction in which she was going. Many of the shops were closed. She had grown used on the journey up to the untidiness of a Chinese street, but here was the litter of weeks, garbage and refuse; and the stench was so horrible that she had to put her handkerchief to her face. Passing through Chinese cities she had been incommoded by the staring of the crowd, but now she noticed that no more than an indifferent glance was thrown at her. The passers-by, scattered rather than as usual thronging, seemed intent on their own affairs. They were cowed and listless. Now and then as they went by a house they heard the beating of gongs and the shrill, sustained lament of unknown instruments. Behind those closed doors one was lying dead.

"Here we are," said Waddington at last.

The chair was set down at a small doorway, surmounted by a cross, in a long white wall, and Kitty stepped out. He rang the bell.

"You mustn't expect anything very grand, you know. They're miserably poor."

The door was opened by a Chinese girl, and after a word or two from Waddington she led them into a little room on the side of the corridor. It contained a large table covered with a chequered oilcloth and round the walls was a set of stiff chairs. At one end of the room was a statue, in plaster, of the Blessed Virgin. In a moment a nun came in, short and plump, with a homely face, red cheeks and merry eyes. Waddington, introducing Kitty to her, called her *Sœur St. Joseph*.

"*C'est la dame du docteur?*" she asked, beaming, and then added that the Mother Superior would join them directly.

Sister St. Joseph could speak no English and Kitty's French was halting; but Waddington, fluent, voluble and inaccurate, maintained a stream of facetious comment which convulsed the good-humoured nun. Her cheerful, easy laughter not a little astonished Kitty. She had an idea that the religious were always grave, and this sweet and childlike merriment touched her.

CHAPTER XLI

THE door opened, to Kitty's fancy not quite naturally but as though it swung back of itself on its hinges, and the Mother Superior entered the little room. She stood for an instant on the threshold and a grave smile hovered upon her lips as she looked at the laughing Sister and Waddington's puckered, clownish face. Then she came forward and held out her hand to Kitty.

"Mrs. Fane?" She spoke in English with a good deal of accent, but with a correct pronunciation, and she gave the shadow of a bow. "It is a great pleasure to me to make the acquaintance of the wife of our good and brave doctor."

Kitty felt that the Superior's eyes held her in a long and unembarrassed look of appraisal. It was so frank that it was not uncivil; you felt that here was a woman whose business it was to form an opinion of others and to whom it never occurred that subterfuge was necessary. With a dignified affability she motioned to her visitors to take chairs and herself sat down. Sister St.

Joseph, smiling still but silent, stood at the side but a little behind the Superior.

"I know you English like tea," said the Mother Superior, "and I have ordered some. But I must make my excuses if it is served in the Chinese fashion. I know that Mr. Waddington prefers whisky, but that I am afraid I cannot offer him."

She smiled and there was a hint of malice in her grave eyes.

"Oh, come, *ma mère*, you speak as if I were a confirmed drunkard."

"I wish you could say that you never drink, Mr. Waddington."

"I can at all events say that I never drink except to excess."

The Mother Superior laughed and translated into French for Sister St. Joseph the flippant remark. She looked at him with lingering, friendly eyes.

"We must make allowances for Mr. Waddington because two or three times when we had no money at all and did not know how we were to feed our orphans Mr. Waddington came to our rescue."

The convert who had opened the door for them now came in with a tray on which were Chinese cups, a teapot, and a little plate of the French cakes called *madeleines*.

"You must eat the *madeleines*," said the Mother Superior, "because Sister St. Joseph made them for you herself this morning."

They talked of commonplace things. The Mother Superior asked Kitty how long she had been in China and if the journey from Hong-Kong had greatly tired her. She asked her if she had been in France and if she did not find the climate of Hong-Kong trying. It was a conversation, trivial but friendly, which gained a peculiar savour from the circumstances. The parlour was very quiet, so that you could hardly believe that you were in the midst of a populous city. Peace dwelt there. And yet, all round about, the epidemic was raging and the people, terrified and restless, were kept in check but by the strong will of a soldier who was more than half a brigand. Within the convent walls the infirmary was crowded with sick and dying soldiers, and of the orphans in the nuns' charge a quarter were dead.

Kitty, impressed she hardly knew why, observed the grave lady who asked her these amiable questions. She was dressed in white and the only colour on her habit was the red heart that burned on her breast. She was a woman of middle age, she might have been

forty or fifty, it was impossible to say, for there were few wrinkles on her smooth, pale face, and you received the impression that she was far from young chiefly from the dignity of her bearing, her assurance, and the emaciation of her strong and beautiful hands. The face was long, with a large mouth and large, even teeth; the nose, though not small, was delicate and sensitive; but it was the eyes, under their thin black brows, which gave her face its intense and tragic character. They were very large, black, and, though not exactly cold, by their calm steadiness strangely compelling. Your first thought when you looked at the Mother Superior was that as a girl she must have been beautiful, but in a moment you realised that this was a woman whose beauty, depending on character, had grown with advancing years. Her voice was deep, low and controlled, and whether she spoke in English or in French she spoke slowly. But the most striking thing about her was the air she had of authority tempered by Christian charity; you felt in her the habit of command. To be obeyed was natural to her, but she accepted obedience with humility. You could not fail to see that she was deeply conscious of the authority of the Church which upheld her. But Kitty had a surmise that notwithstanding her austere demeanour she had for human frailty a human tolerance; and it was impossible to look at her grave smile when she listened to Waddington, unabashed, talking nonsense, without being sure that she had a lively sense of the ridiculous.

But there was some other quality in her which Kitty vaguely felt, but could not put a name to. It was something that, notwithstanding the Mother Superior's cordiality and the exquisite manners which made Kitty feel like an awkward school-girl, held her at a distance.

CHAPTER XLII

"*Monsieur ne mange rien*," said Sister St. Joseph.

"Monsieur's palate is ruined by Manchu cooking," replied the Mother Superior.

The smile left Sister St. Joseph's face and she assumed an expression of some primness. Waddington, a roguish glance in his eyes, took another cake. Kitty did not understand the incident.

"To prove to you how unjust you are, *ma mère*, I will ruin the excellent dinner that awaits me."

"If Mrs. Fane would like to see over the convent I shall be glad to show her." The Mother Superior turned to Kitty with a deprecating smile. "I am sorry you should see it just now when everything is in disorder. We have so much work and not enough Sisters to do it. Colonel Yü has insisted on our putting our infirmary at the disposal of sick soldiers and we have had to make the *réfectoire* into an infirmary for our orphans."

She stood at the door to allow Kitty to pass and together, followed by Sister St. Joseph and Waddington, they walked along cool white corridors. They went first into a large, bare room where a number of Chinese girls were working at elaborate embroideries. They stood up when the visitors entered and the Mother Superior showed Kitty specimens of the work.

"We go on with it notwithstanding the epidemic because it takes their minds off the danger."

They went to a second room in which younger girls were doing plain sewing, hemming and stitching, and then into a third where there were only tiny children under the charge of a Chinese convert. They were playing noisily and when the Mother Superior came in they crowded round her, mites of two and three, with their black Chinese eyes and their black hair; and they seized her hands and hid themselves in her great skirts. An enchanting smile lit up her grave face, and she fondled them; she spoke little chaffing words which Kitty, ignorant though she was of Chinese, could tell were like caresses. She shuddered a little, for in their uniform dress, sallow-skinned, stunted, with their flat noses, they looked to her hardly human. They were repulsive. But the Mother Superior stood among them like Charity itself. When she wished to leave the room they would not let her go, but clung to her, so that, with smiling expostulations, she had to use a gentle force to free herself. They at all events found nothing terrifying in this great lady.

"You know of course," she said, as they walked along another corridor, "that they are only orphans in the sense that their parents have wished to be rid of them. We give them a few cash for every child that is brought in, otherwise they will not take the trouble, but do away with them." She turned to the Sister. "Have any come to-day?" she asked.

"Four."

"Now, with the cholera, they are more than ever anxious not to be burdened with useless girls."

She showed Kitty the dormitories and then they passed a door on which was painted the word *infirmierie*. Kitty heard groans and loud cries and sounds as though beings not human were in pain.

"I will not show you the infirmary," said the Mother Superior in her placid tones. "It is not a sight that one would wish to see." A thought struck her. "I wonder if Dr. Fane is there?"

She looked interrogatively at the Sister and she, with her merry smile, opened the door and slipped in. Kitty shrank back as the open door allowed her to hear more horribly the tumult within. Sister St. Joseph came back.

"No, he has been and will not be back again till later."

"What about number six?"

"*Pauvre garçon*, he's dead."

The Mother Superior crossed herself and her lips moved in a short and silent prayer.

They passed by a courtyard and Kitty's eyes fell upon two long shapes that lay side by side on the ground covered with a piece of blue cotton. The Superior turned to Waddington.

"We are so short of beds that we have to put two patients in one and the moment a sick man dies he must be bundled out in order to make room for another." But she gave Kitty a smile. "Now we will show you our chapel. We are very proud of it. One of our friends in France sent us a little while ago a life-size statue of the Blessed Virgin."

CHAPTER XLIII

THE chapel was no more than a long, low room with whitewashed walls and rows of deal benches; at the end was the altar on which stood the image; it was in plaster of Paris painted in crude colours; it was very bright and new and garish. Behind it was a picture in oils of the Crucifixion with the two Marys at the foot of the Cross in extravagant attitudes of grief. The drawing was bad and the dark pigments were put on with an eye that knew nothing of the beauty of colour. Around the walls were the Stations of the Cross painted by the same unfortunate hand. The chapel was hideous and vulgar.

The nuns on entering knelt down to say a prayer and then, rising, the Mother Superior began once more to chat with Kitty.

"Everything that can be broken is broken when it comes here, but the statue presented to us by our benefactor came from Paris without so much as the smallest chip. There is no doubt that it was a miracle."

Waddington's malicious eyes gleamed, but he held his tongue.

"The altar-piece and the Stations of the Cross were painted by one of our Sisters, Sœur St. Anselme." The Mother Superior crossed herself, "She was a real artist. Unfortunately, she fell a victim to the epidemic. Do you not think that they are very beautiful?"

Kitty faltered an affirmative. On the altar were bunches of paper flowers and the candlesticks were distractingly ornate.

"We have the privilege of keeping here the Blessed Sacrament."

"Yes?" said Kitty, not understanding.

"It has been a great comfort to us during this time of so terrible trouble."

They left the chapel and retraced their steps to the parlour in which they had first sat.

"Would you like to see the babies that came in this morning before you go?"

"Very much," said Kitty.

The Mother Superior led them into a tiny room on the other side of the passage. On a table, under a cloth, there was a singular wriggling. The Sister drew back the cloth and displayed four tiny, naked infants. They were very red and they made funny restless movements with their arms and legs; their quaint little Chinese faces were screwed up into strange grimaces. They looked hardly human; queer animals of an unknown species, and yet there was something singularly moving in the sight. The Mother Superior looked at them with an amused smile.

"They seem very lively. Sometimes they are brought in only to die. Of course we baptise them the moment they come."

"The lady's husband will be pleased with them," said Sister St. Joseph. "I think he could play by the hour with the babies. When they cry he has only to take them up, and he makes them comfortable in the crook of his arm, so that they laugh with delight."

Then Kitty and Waddington found themselves at the door. Kitty gravely thanked the Mother Superior for the trouble she had taken. The nun bowed with a condescension that was at once dignified and affable.

"It has been a great pleasure. You do not know how kind and helpful your husband has been to us. He has been sent to us by Heaven. I am glad that you came with him. When he goes home it must be a great comfort to him to have you there with your love and your—your sweet face. You must take care of him and not let him work too hard. You must look after him for all our sakes."

Kitty flushed. She did not know what to say. The Mother Superior held out her hand and while she held it Kitty was conscious of those cool, thoughtful eyes which rested on her with detachment and yet with something that looked like a profound understanding.

Sister St. Joseph closed the door behind them and Kitty got into her chair. They went back through the narrow, winding streets. Waddington made a casual remark: Kitty did not answer. He looked round, but the side curtains of the chair were drawn and he could not see her. He walked on in silence. But when they reached the river and she stepped out, to his surprise he saw that her eyes were streaming with tears.

"What is the matter?" he asked, his face puckered into an expression of dismay.

"Nothing." She tried to smile. "Only foolishness."

CHAPTER XLIV

ALONE once more in the sordid parlour of the dead missionary, lying on the long chair that faced the window, her abstracted eyes on the temple across the river (now again at the approach of evening aerial and lovely), Kitty tried to set in order the feelings in her heart. She would never have believed that this visit to the convent could so have moved her. She had gone from curiosity. She had nothing else to do and after looking for so many days at the walled city across the water she was not unwilling to have at least a glimpse of its mysterious streets.

But once within the convent it had seemed to her that she was transported into another world situated strangely neither in space nor time. Those bare rooms and the white corridors, austere and simple, seemed to possess the spirit of something remote and mystical. The little chapel, so ugly and vulgar, in its very crude-

ness was pathetic; it had something which was wanting in the greatness of a cathedral, with its stained glass and its pictures: it was very humble; and the faith which had adorned it, the affection which cherished it, had endued it with a delicate beauty of the soul. The methodical way in which the convent's work was carried on in the midst of the pestilence showed a coolness in the face of danger and a practical sense, almost ironical it was so matter-of-fact, which were deeply impressive. In Kitty's ears rang still the ghastly sounds she heard when for a moment Sister St. Joseph opened the infirmary door.

It was unexpected, the way they had spoken of Walter. First the Sister and then the Mother Superior herself, and the tone of her voice had been very gentle when she praised him. Oddly enough it gave her a little thrill of pride to know that they thought so well of him. Waddington also had told something of what Walter was doing; but it was not only his competence that the nuns praised (in Hong-Kong she had known that he was thought clever), they spoke of his thoughtfulness and his tenderness. Of course he could be very tender. He was at his best when you were ill; he was too intelligent to exasperate, and his touch was pleasant, cool and soothing. By some magic he seemed able by his mere presence to relieve your suffering. She knew that she would never see again in his eyes the look of affection which she had once been so used to that she found it merely exasperating. She knew now how immense was his capacity for loving; in some odd way he was pouring it out on these wretched sick who had only him to look to. She did not feel jealousy, but a sense of emptiness; it was as though a support that she had grown so accustomed to as not to realise its presence were suddenly withdrawn from her so that she swayed this way and that like a thing that was top-heavy.

She had only contempt for herself because once she had felt contempt for Walter. He must have known how she regarded him and he had accepted her estimate without bitterness. She was a fool and he knew it and because he loved her it had made no difference to him. She did not hate him now, nor feel resentment of him, but fear rather and perplexity. She could not admit but that he had remarkable qualities, sometimes she thought that there was even in him a strange and unattractive greatness; it was curious then that she could not love him, but loved still a man whose worthlessness was now so clear to her. After thinking, thinking, all through those long days she rated accurately Charles

Townsend's value; he was a common fellow and his qualities were second-rate. If she could only tear from her heart the love that still lingered there! She tried not to think of him.

Waddington too thought highly of Walter. She alone had been blind to his merit. Why? Because he loved her and she did not love him. What was it in the human heart that made you despise a man because he loved you? But Waddington had confessed that he did not like Walter. Men didn't. It was easy to see that those two nuns had for him a feeling which was very like affection. He was different with women; notwithstanding his shyness you felt in him an exquisite kindliness.

CHAPTER XLV

BUT after all it was the nuns that had most deeply touched her. Sister St. Joseph, with her merry face and apple-red cheeks; she had been one of the little band that came out to China with the Mother Superior ten years before and she had seen one after another of her companions die of disease, privation and homesickness; and yet she remained cheerful and happy. What was it that gave her that naïve and charming humour? And the Mother Superior. Kitty in fancy stood again in her presence and once more she felt humble and ashamed. Though she was so simple and unaffected she had a native dignity which inspired awe, and you could not imagine that anyone could treat her without respect. Sister St. Joseph by the way she stood, by every small gesture and the intonation of her answers, had shown the deep submission in which she held herself; and Waddington, frivolous and impertinent, had shown by his tone that he was not quite at his ease. Kitty thought it unnecessary to have told her that the Mother Superior belonged to one of the great families of France; there was that in her bearing which suggested ancient race, and she had the authority of one who has never known that it is possible to be disobeyed. She had the condescension of a great lady and the humility of a saint. There was in her strong, handsome and ravaged face an austerity that was passionate; and at the same time she had a solicitude and a gentleness which permitted those little children to cluster, noisy and unafraid, in the assurance of her deep affection. When she had looked at the four new-born babies

she had worn a smile that was sweet and yet profound: it was like a ray of sunshine on a wild and desolate heath. What Sister St. Joseph had said so carelessly of Walter moved Kitty strangely; she knew that he had desperately wanted her to bear a child, but she had never suspected from his reticence that he was capable with a baby of showing without embarrassment a charming and playful tenderness. Most men were silly and awkward with babies. How strange he was!

But to all that moving experience there had been a shadow (a dark lining to the silver cloud), insistent and plain, which disconcerted her. In the sober gaiety of Sister St. Joseph, and much more in the beautiful courtesy of the Mother Superior, she had felt an aloofness which oppressed her. They were friendly and even cordial, but at the same time they held something back, she knew not what, so that she was conscious that she was nothing but a casual stranger. There was a barrier between her and them. They spoke a different language not only of the tongue but of the heart. And when the door was closed upon her she felt that they had put her out of their minds so completely, going about their neglected work again without delay, that for them she might never have existed. She felt shut out not only from that poor little convent, but from some mysterious garden of the spirit after which with all her soul she hankered. She felt on a sudden alone as she had never felt alone before. That was why she had wept.

And now, throwing back her head wearily, she sighed: "Oh, I'm so worthless."

CHAPTER XLVI

THAT evening Walter came back to the bungalow a little earlier than usual. Kitty was lying on the long chair by the open window. It was nearly dark.

"Don't you want a lamp?" he asked.

"They'll bring it when dinner is ready."

He talked to her always quite casually, of trifling things, as though they were friendly acquaintances, and there was never anything in his manner to suggest that he harboured malice in his heart. He never met her eyes and he never smiled. He was scrupulously polite.

"Walter, what do you propose we should do if we get through the epidemic?" she asked.

He waited for a moment before answering. She could not see his face.

"I haven't thought."

In the old days she said carelessly whatever came into her head; it never occurred to her to think before she spoke; but now she was afraid of him; she felt her lips tremble and her heart beat painfully.

"I went to the convent this afternoon."

"So I heard."

She forced herself to speak though she could hardly frame the words.

"Did you really want me to die when you brought me here?"

"If I were you I'd leave well alone, Kitty. I don't think any good will come of talking about what we should do much better to forget."

"But you don't forget; neither do I. I've been thinking a great deal since I came here. Won't you listen to what I have to say?"

"Certainly."

"I treated you very badly. I was unfaithful to you."

He stood stock still. His immobility was strangely terrifying.

"I don't know whether you'll understand what I mean. That sort of thing doesn't mean very much to a woman when it's over. I think women have never quite understood the attitude that men take up." She spoke abruptly, in a voice she would hardly have recognised as her own. "You know what Charlie was and you knew what he'd do. Well, you were quite right. He's a worthless creature. I suppose I shouldn't have been taken in by him if I hadn't been as worthless as he. I don't ask you to forgive me. I don't ask you to love me as you used to love me. But couldn't we be friends? With all these people dying in thousands round us, and with those nuns in their convent . . ."

"What have they got to do with it?" he interrupted.

"I can't quite explain. I had such a singular feeling when I went there to-day. It all seems to mean so much. It's all so terrible and their self-sacrifice is so wonderful; I can't help feeling it's absurd and disproportionate, if you understand what I mean, to distress yourself because a foolish woman has been unfaithful to you. I'm much too worthless and insignificant for you to give me a thought."

He did not answer, but he did not move away; he seemed to be waiting for her to continue.

"Mr. Waddington and the nuns have told me such wonderful things about you. I'm very proud of you, Walter."

"You used not to be; you used to feel contempt for me. Don't you still?"

"Don't you know that I'm afraid of you?"

Again he was silent.

"I don't understand you," he said at last. "I don't know what it is you want."

"Nothing for myself. I only want you to be a little less unhappy."

She felt him stiffen and his voice was very cold when he answered.

"You're mistaken in thinking I'm unhappy. I have a great deal too much to do to think of you very often."

"I have wondered if the nuns would allow me to go and work at the convent. They are very shorthanded and if I could be of any help I should be grateful to them."

"It is not easy work or pleasant work. I doubt if it would amuse you long."

"Do you absolutely despise me, Walter?"

"No." He hesitated and his voice was strange. "I despise myself."

CHAPTER XLVII

It was after dinner. As usual Walter sat by the lamp and read. He read every evening till Kitty went to bed and then went into a laboratory which he had fitted up in one of the bungalow's empty rooms. Here he worked late into the night. He slept little. He was occupied with she knew not what experiments. He told her nothing of his work; but even in the old days he had been reticent on this: he was not by nature expansive. She thought deeply of what he had just said to her: the conversation had led to nothing. She knew him so little that she could not be sure if he was speaking the truth or not. Was it possible that, whereas he now existed so ominously for her, she had entirely ceased to exist for him? Her conversation, which had entertained him once because he loved

her, now that he loved her no longer might be merely tedious to him. It mortified her.

She looked at him. The light of the lamp displayed his profile as though it were a cameo. With his regular and finely-cut features it was very distinguished, but it was more than severe, it was grim: that immobility of his, only his eyes moving as he perused each page, was vaguely terrifying. Who would have thought that this hard face could be melted by passion to such a tenderness of expression? She knew and it excited in her a little shiver of distaste. It was strange that though he was good-looking as well as honest, reliable and talented, it had been so impossible for her to love him. It was a relief that she need never again submit to his caresses.

He would not answer when she had asked him whether in forcing her to come here he had really wished to kill her. The mystery of this fascinated and horrified her. He was so extraordinarily kind; it was incredible that he could have had such a devilish intention. He must have suggested it only to frighten her and to get back on Charlie (that would be like his sardonic humour), and then from obstinacy or from fear of looking foolish insisted on her going through with it.

Yes, he said he despised himself. What did he mean by that? Once again Kitty looked at his calm, cool face. She might not even be in the room, he was so unconscious of her.

"Why do you despise yourself?" she asked, hardly knowing that she spoke, as though she were continuing without a break the earlier conversation.

He put down his book and observed her reflectively. He seemed to gather his thoughts from a remote distance.

"Because I loved you."

She flushed and looked away. She could not bear his cold, steady and appraising gaze. She understood what he meant. It was a little while before she answered.

"I think you do me an injustice," she said. "It's not fair to blame me because I was silly and frivolous and vulgar. I was brought up like that. All the girls I know are like that. . . . It's like reproaching someone who has no ear for music because he's bored at a symphony concert. Is it fair to blame me because you ascribed to me qualities I hadn't got? I never tried to deceive you by pretending I was anything I wasn't. I was just pretty and gay. You don't ask for a pearl necklace or a sable coat at a

booth in a fair; you ask for a tin trumpet and a toy balloon."
 "I don't blame you."

His voice was weary. She was beginning to feel a trifle impatient with him. Why could he not realise, what suddenly had become so clear to her, that, beside all the terror of death under whose shadow they lay and beside the awe of the beauty which she had caught a glimpse of that day, their own affairs were trivial? What did it really matter if a silly woman had committed adultery and why should her husband, face to face with the sublime, give it a thought? It was strange that Walter with all his cleverness should have so little sense of proportion. Because he had dressed a doll in gorgeous robes and set her in a sanctuary to worship her, and then discovered that the doll was filled with sawdust, he could neither forgive himself nor her. His soul was lacerated. It was all make-believe that he had lived on, and when the truth shattered it he thought reality itself was shattered. It was true enough, he would not forgive her because he could not forgive himself.

She thought that she heard him give a faint sigh and she shot a rapid glance at him. A sudden thought struck her and it took her breath away. She only just refrained from giving a cry.

Was it what they called—a broken heart—that he suffered from?

CHAPTER XLVIII

ALL the next day Kitty thought of the convent; and the morning after, early, soon after Walter had gone, taking the amah with her to get chairs, she crossed the river. It was barely day and the Chinese crowding the ferry-boat, some in the blue cotton of the peasant, others in the black robes of respectability, had a strange look of the dead being borne over the water to the land of shadow. And when they stepped ashore they stood for a little at the landing-place uncertainly as though they did not quite know where to go, before desultorily, in twos and threes, they wandered up the hill.

At that hour the streets of the city were very empty so that more than ever it seemed a city of the dead. The passers-by had an abstracted air so that you might almost have thought them ghosts. The sky was unclouded and the early sun shed a heavenly mildness on the scene; it was difficult to imagine, on that blithe, fresh and

smiling morn, that the city lay gasping, like a man whose life is being throttled out of him by a maniac's hands, in the dark clutch of the pestilence. It was incredible that nature (the blue of the sky was clear like a child's heart) should be so indifferent when men were writhing in agony and going to their death in fear. When the chairs were set down at the convent door a beggar arose from the ground and asked Kitty for alms. He was clad in faded and shapeless rags that looked as though he had raked them out of a muck-heap, and through their rents you saw his skin hard and rough and tanned like the hide of a goat; his bare legs were emaciated, and his head, with its shock of coarse grey hair (the cheeks hollow, the eyes wild), was the head of a madman. Kitty turned from him in frightened horror, and the chair-bearers in gruff tones bade him begone, but he was importunate, and to be rid of him, shuddering, Kitty gave him a few cash.

The door was opened and the amah explained that Kitty wished to see the Mother Superior. She was taken once more into the stiff parlour in which it seemed a window had never been opened, and here she sat so long that she began to think her message had not been delivered. At last the Mother Superior came in.

"I must ask you to excuse me for keeping you waiting," she said. "I did not expect you and I was occupied."

"Forgive me for troubling you. I am afraid I have come at an inconvenient moment."

The Mother Superior gave her a smile, austere but sweet, and begged her to sit down. But Kitty saw that her eyes were swollen. She had been weeping. Kitty was startled, for she had received from the Mother Superior the impression that she was a woman whom earthly troubles could not greatly move.

"I am afraid something has happened," she faltered. "Would you like me to go away? I can come another time."

"No, no. Tell me what I can do for you. It is only—only that one of our Sisters died last night." Her voice lost its even tone and her eyes filled with tears. "It is wicked of me to grieve, for I know that her good and simple soul has flown straight to heaven; she was a saint; but it is difficult always to control one's weakness. I am afraid I am not always very reasonable."

"I'm so sorry, I'm so dreadfully sorry," said Kitty.

Her ready sympathy brought a sob into her voice.

"She was one of the Sisters who came out from France with me ten years ago. There are only three of us left now. I remember,

we stood in a little group at the end of the boat (what do you call it, the bow?) and as we steamed out of the harbour at Marseilles and we saw the golden figure of Saint-Marie la Grace, we said a prayer together. It had been my greatest wish since I entered religion to be allowed to come to China, but when I saw the land grow distant I could not prevent myself from weeping. I was their Superior; it was not a very good example I was giving my daughters. And then Sister St. Francis Xavier—that is the name of the Sister who died last night—took my hand and told me not to grieve; for wherever we were, she said, there was France and there was God.”

That severe and handsome face was distorted by the grief which human nature wrung from her and by the effort to restrain the tears which her reason and her faith refused. Kitty looked away. She felt that it was indecent to peer into that struggle.

“I have been writing to her father. She, like me, was her mother’s only daughter. They were fisher folk in Brittany, and it will be hard for them. Oh, when will this terrible epidemic cease? Two of our girls have been attacked this morning and nothing but a miracle can save them. These Chinese have no resistance. The loss of Sister St. Francis is very severe. There is so much to do and now fewer than ever to do it. We have Sisters at our other houses in China who are eager to come, all our Order, I think, would give anything in the world (only they have nothing) to come here; but it is almost certain death; and so long as we can manage with the Sisters we have I am unwilling that others should be sacrificed.”

“That encourages me, *ma mère*,” said Kitty. “I have been feeling that I had come at a very unfortunate moment. You said the other day that there was more work than the Sisters could do, and I was wondering if you would allow me to come and help them. I do not mind what I do if I can only be useful. I should be thankful if you just set me to scrub the floors.”

The Mother Superior gave an amused smile and Kitty was astonished at the mobile temperament which could so easily pass from mood to mood.

“There is no need to scrub the floors. That is done after a fashion by the orphans.” She paused and looked kindly at Kitty. “My dear child, do you not think that you have done enough in coming with your husband here? That is more than many wives would have had the courage to do, and for the rest how can you be

better occupied than in giving him peace and comfort when he comes home to you after the day's work? Believe me, he needs then all your love and all your consideration."

Kitty could not easily meet the eyes which rested on her with a detached scrutiny and with an ironical kindness.

"I have nothing whatever to do from morning till night," said Kitty. "I feel that there is so much to be done that I cannot bear to think that I am idle. I don't want to make a nuisance of myself, and I know that I have no claim either on your kindness or on your time, but I mean what I say and it would be a charity that you were doing me if you would let me be of some help to you."

"You do not look very strong. When you did us the pleasure of coming to see us the day before yesterday it seemed to me that you were very pale. Sister St. Joseph thought that perhaps you were going to have a baby."

"No, no," cried Kitty, flushing to the roots of her hair.

The Mother Superior gave a little, silvery laugh.

"It is nothing to be ashamed of, my dear child, nor is there anything improbable in the supposition. How long have you been married?"

"I am very pale because I am naturally pale, but I am very strong, and I promise you I am not afraid of work."

Now the Superior was complete mistress of herself. She assumed unconsciously the air of authority which was habitual to her and she held Kitty in an appraising scrutiny. Kitty felt unaccountably nervous.

"Can you speak Chinese?"

"I'm afraid not," answered Kitty.

"Ah, that is a pity. I could have put you in charge of the elder girls. It is very difficult just now, and I am afraid they will get—what do you call? Out of hand?" she concluded with a tentative sound.

"Could I not be of help to the Sisters in nursing? I am not at all afraid of the cholera. I could nurse the girls or the soldiers."

The Mother Superior, unsmiling now, a reflective look on her face, shook her head.

"You do not know what the cholera is. It is a dreadful thing to see. The work in the infirmary is done by soldiers and we need a Sister only to supervise. And so far as the girls are concerned . . . no, no, I am sure your husband would not wish it; it is a terrible and frightening sight."

"I should grow used to it."

"No, it is out of the question. It is our business and our privilege to do such things, but there is no call for you to do so."

"You make me feel very useless and very helpless. It seems incredible that there should be nothing that I can do."

"Have you spoken to your husband of your wish?"

"Yes."

The Mother Superior looked at her as though she were delving into the secrets of her heart, but when she saw Kitty's anxious and appealing look she gave a smile.

"Of course you are a Protestant?" she asked.

"Yes."

"It doesn't matter. Dr. Watson, the missionary who died, was a Protestant, and it made no difference. He was all that was most charming to us. We owe him a deep debt of gratitude."

Now the flicker of a smile passed over Kitty's face, but she did not say anything. The Mother Superior seemed to reflect. She rose to her feet.

"It is very good of you. I think I can find something for you to do. It is true that now Sister St. Francis has been taken from us it is impossible for us to cope with the work. When will you be ready to start?"

"Now."

"*A la bonne heure*. I am content to hear you say that."

"I promise you I will do my best. I am very grateful to you for the opportunity that you are giving me."

The Mother Superior opened the parlour door, but as she was going out she hesitated. Once more she gave Kitty a long, searching and sagacious look. Then she laid her hand gently on her arm.

"You know, my dear child, that one cannot find peace in work or in pleasure, in the world or in a convent, but only in one's soul."

Kitty gave a little start, but the Mother Superior passed swiftly out.

CHAPTER XLIX

"KITTY found the work a refreshment to her spirit. She went to the convent every morning soon after sunrise and did not return to the bungalow till the westering sun flooded the narrow river and its

crowded junks with gold. The Mother Superior gave into her care the smaller children. Kitty's mother had brought to London from her native Liverpool a practical sense of housewifery, and Kitty, notwithstanding her air of frivolity, had always had certain gifts to which she referred only in bantering tones. Thus she could cook quite well and she sewed beautifully. When she disclosed this talent she was set to supervise the stitching and hemming of the younger girls. They knew a little French and every day she picked up a few words of Chinese so that it was not difficult for her to manage. At other times she had to see that the smaller children did not get into mischief; she had to dress and undress them and take care that they rested when rest was needed. There were a good many babies and these were in charge of amahs, but she was bidden to keep an eye on them. None of the work was very important and she would have liked to do something which was more arduous; but the Mother Superior paid no attention to her entreaties and Kitty stood sufficiently in awe of her not to be importunate.

For the first few days she had to make something of an effort to overcome the faint distaste she felt for these little girls, in their ugly uniforms, with their stiff black hair, their round yellow faces, and their staring, sloe-black eyes. But she remembered the soft look which had transfigured so beautifully the countenance of the Mother Superior when on Kitty's first visit to the convent she had stood surrounded by those ugly little things, and she would not allow herself to surrender to her instinct. And presently, taking in her arms one or other of the tiny creatures, crying because of a fall or a cutting tooth, when Kitty found that a few soft words, though in a language the child could not understand, the pressure of her arms and the softness of her cheek against the weeping yellow face, could comfort and console, she began to lose all her feeling of strangeness. The small children, without any fear of her, came to her in their childish troubles and it gave her a peculiar happiness to discern their confidence. It was the same with the older girls, those to whom she taught sewing; their bright, clever smiles and the pleasure she could give them by a word of praise touched her. She felt that they liked her and, flattered and proud, she liked them in return.

But there was one child that she could not grow used to. It was a little girl of six, an idiot with a huge hydrocephalic head that swayed top-heavily on a small, squat body, large vacant eyes and a

drooling mouth; the creature spoke hoarsely a few mumbled words; it was revolting and horrible; and for some reason it conceived an idiot attachment for Kitty so that it followed her about as she changed her place from one part of the large room to another. It clung to her skirt and rubbed its face against her knees. It sought to fondle her hands. She shivered with disgust. She knew it yearned for caresses and she could not bring herself to touch it.

Once, speaking of it to Sister St. Joseph, she said that it was a pity it lived. Sister St. Joseph smiled and stretched out her hand to the misformed thing. It came and rubbed its bulging forehead against it.

"Poor little mite," said the nun. "She was brought here positively dying. By the mercy of Providence I was at the door just as she came. I thought there was not a moment to lose so I baptised her at once. You would not believe what trouble we have had to keep her with us. Three or four times we thought that her little soul would escape to heaven."

Kitty was silent. Sister St. Joseph in her loquacious way began to gossip of other things. And next day when the idiot child came to her and touched her hand Kitty nerved herself to place it in a caress on the great bare skull. She forced her lips into a smile. But suddenly the child, with an idiot perversity, left her; it seemed to lose interest in her, and that day and the following days paid her no attention. Kitty did not know what she had done and tried to lure it to her with smiles and gestures, but it turned away and pretended not to see her.

CHAPTER L

SINCE the nuns were busy from morning till night with a hundred duties Kitty saw little of them but at the services in the bare, humble chapel. On her first day the Mother Superior, catching sight of her seated at the back behind the girls on the benches according to their ages, stopped and spoke to her.

"You must not think it necessary for you to come to the chapel when we do," she said. "You are a Protestant and you have your own convictions."

"But I like to come, Mother. I find that it rests me."

The Mother Superior gave her a moment's glance and slightly inclined her grave head.

"Of course you will do exactly as you choose. I merely wanted you to understand that you are under no obligation."

But with Sister St. Joseph Kitty soon became on terms not of intimacy perhaps but of familiarity. The economy of the convent was in her charge and to look after the material well-being of that big family kept the Sister on her feet all day. She said that the only time she had to rest was that which she devoted to prayer. But it pleased her toward evening when Kitty was with the girls at their work to come in and, vowing that she was tired out and had not a moment to spare, sit down for a few minutes and gossip. When she was not in the presence of the Mother Superior she was a talkative, merry creature, fond of a joke, and she did not dislike a bit of scandal. Kitty stood in no fear of her, her habit did not prevent Sister St. Joseph from being a good-natured, homely woman, and she chattered with her gaily. She did not mind with her showing how badly she talked French and they laughed with one another over Kitty's mistakes. The Sister taught her every day a few useful words of Chinese. She was a farmer's daughter and at heart she was still a peasant.

"I used to keep the cows when I was little," she said, "like St. Joan of Arc. But I was too wicked to have visions. It was fortunate, I think, for my father would certainly have whipped me if I had. He used often to whip me, the good old man, for I was a very naughty little girl. I am ashamed sometimes when I think now of the pranks I used to play."

Kitty laughed at the thought that this corpulent, middle-aged nun could ever have been a wayward child. And yet there was something childlike in her still so that your heart went out to her: she seemed to have about her an aroma of the countryside in autumn when the apple trees are laden with fruit and the crops are in and safely housed. She had not the tragic and austere saintliness of the Mother Superior, but a gaiety that was simple and happy.

"Do you never wish to go home again, *ma sœur*?" asked Kitty.

"Oh no. It would be too hard to come back. I love to be here and I am never so happy as when I am among the orphans. They're so good, they're so grateful. But it is all very well to be a nun (*on a beau être religieuse*), still one has a mother and one cannot forget that one drank the milk of her breasts. She is old, my mother, and it is hard never to see her again; but then she is fond

of her daughter-in-law, and my brother is good to her. His son is growing up now, I should think they will be glad of an extra pair of strong arms on the farm; he was only a child when I left France, but he promised to have a fist that you could fell an ox with."

It was almost impossible in that quiet room, listening to the nun, to realise that on the other side of these four walls cholera was raging. Sister St. Joseph had an unconcern which conveyed itself to Kitty.

She had a naïve curiosity about the world and its inhabitants. She asked Kitty all kinds of questions about London and England, a country, she thought, where so thick was the fog that you could not see your hand at mid-day, and she wanted to know if Kitty went to balls and whether she lived in a grand house and how many brothers and sisters she had. She spoke often of Walter. The Mother Superior said he was wonderful and every day they prayed for him. How lucky Kitty was to have a husband who was so good and so brave and so clever.

CHAPTER LI

BUT sooner or later Sister St. Joseph returned to the subject of the Mother Superior. Kitty had been conscious from the beginning that the personality of this woman dominated the convent. She was regarded by all that dwelt there with love certainly and with admiration, but also with awe and not a little dread. Notwithstanding her kindness Kitty herself felt like a school-girl in her presence. She was never quite at her ease with her, for she was filled with a sentiment which was so strange that it embarrassed her: reverence. Sister St. Joseph, with an ingenuous desire to impress, told Kitty how great the family was to which the Mother Superior belonged; she had among her ancestors persons of historic importance and she was *un peu* cousin with half the kings in Europe: Alphonso of Spain had hunted at her father's, and they had *châteaux* all over France. It must have been hard to leave so much grandeur. Kitty listened smilingly, but not a little impressed.

"*Du reste*, you have only to look at her," said the Sister, "to see that, *comme famille*, *c'est le dessus du panier*."

"She has the most beautiful hands that I have ever seen," said Kitty.

"Ah, but if you only knew how she had used them. She is not afraid of work, *notre bonne mère*."

When they had come to this city there had been nothing: They had built the convent. The Mother Superior had made the plans and supervised the work. The moment they arrived they began to save the poor little unwanted girls from the baby-tower and the cruel hands of the midwife. At first they had had no beds to sleep in and no glass to keep out the night air ("and there is nothing," said Sister St. Joseph, "which is more unwholesome"); and often they had no money left, not only to pay the builders, but even to buy their simple fare; they lived like peasants—what was she saying? the peasants in France, *tenez*, the men who worked for her father, would have thrown to the pigs the food they ate. And then the Mother Superior would collect her daughters round her and they would kneel and pray; and the Blessed Virgin would send money. A thousand francs would arrive by post next day, or a stranger, an Englishman (a Protestant, if you please) or even a Chinaman would knock at the door while they were actually on their knees and bring them a present. Once they were in such straits that they all made a vow to the Blessed Virgin that they would recite a *neuvaine* in her honour if she succoured them, and, would you believe it? that funny Mr. Waddington came to see us next day and saying that we looked as though we all wanted a good plate of roast beef gave us a hundred dollars.

What a comic little man he was, with his bald head and his little shrewd eyes (*ses petits yeux malins*) and his jokes. *Mon Dieu*, how he murdered the French language, and yet you could not help laughing at him. He was always in a good humour. All through this terrible epidemic he carried himself as if he were enjoying a holiday. He had a heart quite French and a wit so that you would hardly believe he was English. Except for his accent. But sometimes Sister St. Joseph thought he spoke badly on purpose to make you laugh. Of course his morals were not all one could wish; but still that was his business (with a sigh, a shrug and a shake of the head) and he was a bachelor and a young man.

"What is wrong with his morals, *ma sœur*?" asked Kitty smiling.

"Is it possible that you do not know? It is a sin for me to tell you. I have no business to say such things. He lives with a Chinese woman, that is to say, not a Chinese woman, but a Manchu. A princess, it appears, and she loves him to distraction."

"That sounds quite impossible," cried Kitty.

"No, no, I promise you, it is everything that is most true. It is very wicked of him. Those things are not done. Did you not hear, when you first came to the convent and he would not eat the *madeleines* that I had made expressly, that *notre bonne mère* said his stomach was deranged by Manchu cooking? That was what she meant and you should have seen the head that he made. It is a story altogether curious. It appears that he was stationed at Hankow during the revolution when they were massacring the Manchus and this good little Waddington saved the lives of one of their great families. They are related to the Imperial Family. The girl fell violently in love with him and—well, the rest you can imagine. And then when he left Hankow she ran away and followed him and now she follows him everywhere, and he has had to resign himself to keep her, poor fellow, and I dare say he is very fond of her; they are quite charming sometimes, these Manchu women. But what am I thinking of? I have a thousand things to do and I sit here. I am a bad religious. I am ashamed of myself."

CHAPTER LII

KITTY had a queer feeling that she was growing. The constant occupation distracted her mind and the glimpses she had of other lives and other outlooks awakened her imagination. She began to regain her spirits; she felt better and stronger. It had seemed to her that she could do nothing now but weep; but to her surprise, and not a little to her confusion, she caught herself laughing at this and that. It began to seem quite natural to live in the midst of a terrible epidemic. She knew that people were dying to the right and left of her, but she ceased very much to think of it. The Mother Superior had forbidden her to go into the infirmaries and the closed doors excited her curiosity. She would have liked to peep in, but could not do so without being seen, and she did not know what punishment the Mother Superior would inflict upon her. It would be dreadful to be sent away. She was devoted to the children now and they would miss her if she went; in fact she did not know what they would do without her.

And one day it occurred to her that she had neither thought of Charles Townsend nor dreamt of him for a week. Her heart gave a

sudden thud against her ribs: she was cured. She could think of him now with indifference. She loved him no longer. Oh, the relief and the sense of liberation! It was strange to look back and remember how passionately she had yearned for him; she thought she would die when he failed her; she thought life thenceforward had nothing to offer but misery. And now already she was laughing. A worthless creature. What a fool she had made of herself! And now, considering him calmly, she wondered what on earth she had seen in him. It was lucky that Waddington knew nothing, she could never have endured his malicious eyeing and his ironical innuendos. She was free, free at last, free! She could hardly prevent herself from laughing aloud.

The children were playing some romping game and it was her habit to look on with an indulgent smile, restraining them when they made too much noise and taking care that in their boisterousness none was hurt; but now in her high spirits, feeling as young as any of them, she joined in the game. The little girls received her with delight. They chased up and down the room, shouting at the top of their shrill voices, with fantastic and almost barbarous glee. They grew so excited that they leaped into the air with joy. The noise was terrific.

Suddenly the door opened and the Mother Superior stood on the threshold. Kitty, abashed, extricated herself from the clutches of a dozen little girls who with wild shrieks had seized her.

"Is this how you keep these children good and quiet?" asked the Mother Superior, a smile on her lips.

"We were having a game, Mother. They got excited. It is my fault, I led them on."

The Mother Superior came forward and as usual the children clustered about her. She put her hands round their narrow shoulders and playfully pulled their little yellow ears. She looked at Kitty with a long, soft look. Kitty was flushed and she was breathing quickly. Her liquid eyes were shining and her lovely hair, disarranged in all the struggling and the laughter, was in adorable confusion.

"*Que vous êtes belle, ma chère enfant,*" said the Mother Superior. "It does the heart good to look at you. No wonder these children adore you."

Kitty blushed deeply and, she knew not why, tears suddenly filled her eyes. She covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, Mother, you make me ashamed."

"Come, do not be silly. Beauty is also a gift of God, one of the most rare and precious, and we should be thankful if we are happy enough to possess it and thankful, if we are not, that others possess it for our pleasure."

She smiled again and, as though Kitty were a child too, gently patted her soft cheek.

CHAPTER LIII

SINCE she had been working at the convent Kitty had seen less of Waddington. Two or three times he had come down to the river bank to meet her and they had walked up the hill together. He came in to drink a whisky and soda, but he would seldom stay to dinner. One Sunday, however, he suggested that they should take their luncheon with them and go in chairs to a Buddhist monastery. It was situated ten miles from the city and had some reputation as a place of pilgrimage. The Mother Superior, insisting that Kitty must have a day's rest, would not let her work on Sundays and Walter of course was as busy then as usual.

They started early in order to arrive before the heat of the day and were carried along a narrow causeway between the rice-fields. Now and then they passed comfortable farmhouses nestling with friendly intimacy in a grove of bamboos. Kitty enjoyed the idleness; it was pleasant after being cooped up in the city to see about her the wide country. They came to the monastery, straggling low buildings by the side of the river, agreeably shaded by trees, and were led by smiling monks through courtyards, empty with a solemn emptiness, and shown temples with grimacing gods. In the sanctuary sat the Buddha, remote and sad, wistful, abstracted and faintly smiling. There was about everything a sense of dejection; the magnificence was shoddy and ruined; the gods were dusty and the faith that had made them was dying. The monks seemed to stay on sufferance, as though they awaited a notice to quit; and in the smile of the abbot, with his beautiful politeness, was the irony of resignation. One of these days the monks would wander away from the shady, pleasant wood, and the buildings, crumbling and neglected, would be battered by fierce storms and besieged by the surrounding nature. Wild creepers would twine themselves about the dead

images and the trees would grow in the courtyards. Then the gods would dwell there no longer, but evil spirits of darkness.

CHAPTER LIV

THEY sat on the steps of a little building (four lacquered columns and a high, tiled roof under which stood a great bronze bell) and watched the river flow sluggish and with many a bend toward the stricken city. They could see its crenellated walls. The heat hung over it like a pall. But the river, though it flowed so slowly, had still a sense of movement and it gave one a melancholy feeling of the transitoriness of things. Everything passed, and what trace of its passage remained? It seemed to Kitty that they were all, the human race, like the drops of water in that river and they flowed on, each so close to the other and yet so far apart, a nameless flood, to the sea. When all things lasted so short a time and nothing mattered very much, it seemed pitiful that men, attaching an absurd importance to trivial objects, should make themselves and one another so unhappy.

"Do you know Harrington Gardens?" she asked Waddington, with a smile in her beautiful eyes.

"No. Why?"

"Nothing; only it's a long way from here. It's where my people live."

"Are you thinking of going home?"

"No."

"I suppose you'll be leaving here in a couple of months. The epidemic seems to be abating and the cool weather should see the end of it."

"I almost think I shall be sorry to go."

For a moment she thought of the future. She did not know what plans Walter had in mind. He told her nothing. He was cool, polite, silent and inscrutable. Two little drops in that river that flowed silently toward the unknown; two little drops that to themselves had so much individuality and to the onlooker were but an undistinguishable part of the water.

"Take care the nuns don't start converting you," said Waddington, with his malicious little smile.

"They're much too busy. Nor do they care. They're wonderful

and so kind; and yet—I hardly know how to explain it—there is a wall between them and me. I don't know what it is. It is as though they possessed a secret which made all the difference in their lives and which I was unworthy to share. It is not faith; it is something deeper and more—more significant: they walk in a different world from ours and we shall always be strangers to them. Each day when the convent door closes behind me I feel that for them I have ceased to exist."

"I can understand that it is something of a blow to your vanity," he returned mockingly.

"My vanity."

Kitty shrugged her shoulders. Then, smiling once more, she turned to him lazily.

"Why did you never tell me that you lived with a Manchu princess?"

"What have those gossiping old women been telling you? I am sure that it is a sin for nuns to discuss the private affairs of the Customs officials."

"Why should you be so sensitive?"

Waddington glanced down, sideways, so that it gave him an air of slyness. He faintly shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not a thing to advertise. I do not know that it would greatly add to my chances of promotion in the Service."

"Are you very fond of her?"

He looked up now and his ugly little face had the look of a naughty schoolboy's.

"She's abandoned everything for my sake, home, family, security and self-respect. It's a good many years now since she threw everything to the winds to be with me. I've sent her away two or three times, but she's always come back; I've run away from her myself, but she's always followed me. And now I've given it up as a bad job; I think I've got to put up with her for the rest of my life."

"She must really love you to distraction."

"It's a rather funny sensation, you know," he answered, wrinkling a perplexed forehead. "I haven't the smallest doubt that if I really left her, definitely, she would commit suicide. Not with any ill-feeling toward me, but quite naturally, because she was unwilling to live without me. It is a curious feeling it gives one to know that. It can't help meaning something to you."

"But it's loving that's the important thing, not being loved.

One's not even grateful to the people who love one; if one doesn't love them, they only bore one."

"I have no experience of the plural," he replied. "Mine is only in the singular."

"Is she really an Imperial Princess?"

"No, that is a romantic exaggeration of the nuns. She belongs to one of the great families of the Manchus, but they have, of course, been ruined by the revolution. She is all the same a very great lady."

He said it in a tone of pride, so that a smile flickered in Kitty's eyes.

"Are you going to stay here for the rest of your life, then?"

"In China? Yes. What would she do elsewhere? When I retire I shall take a little Chinese house in Peking and spend the rest of my days there."

"Have you any children?"

"No."

She looked at him curiously. It was strange that this little bald-headed man, with his monkey face should have aroused in the alien woman so devastating a passion. She could not tell why the way he spoke of her, notwithstanding his casual manner and his flippant phrases, gave her the impression so strongly of the woman's intense and unique devotion. It troubled her a little.

"It does seem a long way to Harrington Gardens," she smiled.

"Why do you say that?"

"I don't understand anything. Life is so strange. I feel like someone who's lived all his life by a duck-pond and suddenly is shown the sea. It makes me a little breathless, and yet it fills me with elation. I don't want to die, I want to live. I'm beginning to feel a new courage. I feel like one of those old sailors who set sail for undiscovered seas and I think my soul hankers for the unknown."

Waddington looked at her reflectively. Her abstracted gaze rested on the smoothness of the river. Two little drops that flowed silently, silently toward the dark, eternal sea.

"May I come and see the Manchu lady?" asked Kitty, suddenly raising her head.

"She can't speak a word of English."

"You've been very kind to me, you've done a great deal for me, perhaps I could show her by my manner that I had a friendly feeling toward her."

Waddington gave a thin, mocking little smile, but he answered with good-humour.

"I will come and fetch you one day and she shall give you a cup of jasmine tea."

She would not tell him that this story of an alien love had from the first moment strangely intrigued her fancy, and the Manchu Princess stood now as the symbol of something that vaguely, but insistently, beckoned to her. She pointed enigmatically to a mystic land of the spirit.

CHAPTER LV

BUT a day or two later Kitty made an unforeseen discovery.

She went to the convent as usual and set about her first work of seeing that the children were washed and dressed. Since the nuns held firmly that the night air was harmful, the atmosphere in the dormitory was close and fetid. After the freshness of the morning it always made Kitty a little uncomfortable and she hastened to open such windows as would. But to-day she felt on a sudden desperately sick and with her head swimming she stood at the window trying to compose herself. It had never been as bad as this before. Then nausea overwhelmed her and she vomited. She gave a cry so that the children were frightened, and the older girl who was helping her ran up and, seeing Kitty white and trembling, stopped short with an exclamation. Cholera! The thought flashed through Kitty's mind and then a deathlike feeling came over her; she was seized with terror, she struggled for a moment against the night that seemed agonisingly to run through her veins; she felt horribly ill; and then darkness.

When she opened her eyes she did not at first know where she was. She seemed to be lying on the floor and, moving her head slightly, she thought that there was a pillow under it. She could not remember. The Mother Superior was kneeling by her side, holding smelling salts to her nose, and Sister St. Joseph stood looking at her. Then it came back. Cholera! She saw the consternation on the nuns' faces. Sister St. Joseph looked huge and her 'outline was blurred. Once more terror overwhelmed her.

"Oh, Mother, Mother," she sobbed. "Am I going to die? I don't want to die."

"Of course you're not going to die," said the Mother Superior. She was quite composed and there was even amusement in her eyes.

"But it's cholera. Where's Walter? Has he been sent for? Oh, Mother, Mother."

She burst into a flood of tears. The Mother Superior gave her hand and Kitty seized it as though it were a hold upon the life she feared to lose.

"Come, come, my dear child, you mustn't be so silly. It's not cholera or anything of the kind."

"Where's Walter?"

"Your husband is much too busy to be troubled. In five minutes you'll be perfectly well."

Kitty looked at her with staring, harassed eyes. Why did she take it so calmly? It was cruel.

"Keep perfectly quiet for a minute," said the Mother Superior. "There is nothing to alarm yourself about."

Kitty felt her heart beat madly. She had grown so used to the thought of cholera that it had ceased to seem possible that she could catch it. Oh, the fool she had been! She knew she was going to die. She was frightened. The girls brought in a long rattan chair and placed it by the window.

"Come, let us lift you," said the Mother Superior. "You will be more comfortable on the chaise longue. Do you think you can stand?"

She put her hands under Kitty's arms and Sister St. Joseph helped her to her feet. She sank exhausted into the chair.

"I had better shut the window," said Sister St. Joseph. "The early morning air cannot be good for her."

"No, no," said Kitty. "Please leave it open."

It gave her confidence to see the blue sky. She was shaken, but certainly she began to feel better. The two nuns looked at her for a moment in silence, and Sister St. Joseph said something to the Mother Superior which she could not understand. Then the Mother Superior sat on the side of the chair and took her hand.

"Listen, *ma chère enfant* . . ."

She asked her one or two questions. Kitty answered them without knowing what they meant. Her lips were trembling so that she could hardly frame the words.

"There is no doubt about it," said Sister St. Joseph. "I am not one to be deceived in such a matter."

She gave a little laugh in which Kitty seemed to discern a certain excitement and not a little affection. The Mother Superior, still holding Kitty's hand, smiled with soft tenderness.

"Sister St. Joseph has more experience of these things than I have, dear child, and she said at once what was the matter with you. She was evidently quite right."

"What do you mean?" asked Kitty anxiously.

"It is quite evident. Did the possibility of such a thing never occur to you? 'You are with child, my dear.'"

The start that Kitty gave shook her from head to foot, and she put her feet to the ground as though to spring up.

"Lie still, lie still," said the Mother Superior.

Kitty felt herself blush furiously and she put her hands to her breasts.

"It's impossible. It isn't true."

"*Qu'est ce qu'elle dit?*" asked Sister St. Joseph.

The Mother Superior translated. Sister St. Joseph's broad simple face, with its red cheeks, was beaming.

"No mistakes is possible. I give you my word of honour."

"How long have you been married, my child?" asked the Mother Superior. "Why, when my sister-in-law had been married as long as you she had already two babies."

Kitty sank back into the chair. There was death in her heart.

"I'm so ashamed," she whispered.

"Because you are going to have a baby? Why, what can be more natural?"

"*Quelle joie pour le docteur,*" said Sister St. Joseph.

"Yes, think what a happiness for your husband. He will be overwhelmed with joy. You have only to see him with babies, and the look on his face when he plays with them, to see how enchanted he will be to have one of his own."

For a little while Kitty was silent. The two nuns looked at her with tender interest and the Mother Superior stroked her hand.

"It was silly of me not to have suspected it before," said Kitty. "At all events I'm glad it's not cholera. I feel very much better. I will get back to my work."

"Not to-day, my dear child. You have had a shock, you had much better go home and rest yourself."

"No, no, I would much rather stay and work."

"I insist. What would our good doctor say if I let you be imprudent? Come to-morrow, if you like, or the day after, but

to-day you must be quiet. I will send for a chair. Would you like me to let one of our young girls go with you?"

"Oh, no; I shall be all right alone."

CHAPTER LVI

KITTY was lying on her bed and the shutters were closed. It was after luncheon and the servants slept. What she had learnt that morning (and now she was certain that it was true) filled her with consternation. Ever since she came home she had been trying to think; but her mind was a blank, and she could not collect her thoughts. Suddenly she heard a step, the feet were booted so that it could not be one of the boys; with a gasp of apprehension she realised that it could only be her husband. He was in the sitting-room and she heard herself called. She did not reply. There was a moment's silence and then a knock on her door.

"Yes?"

"May I come in?"

Kitty rose from her bed and slipped into a dressing-gown.

"Yes."

He entered. She was glad that the closed shutters shadowed her face.

"I hope I didn't wake you. I knocked very, very gently."

"I haven't been asleep."

He went to one of the windows and threw open the shutter. A flood of warm light streamed into the room.

"What is it?" she asked. "Why are you back so early?"

"The Sisters said that you weren't very well. I thought I had better come and see what was the matter."

A flash of anger passed through her.

"What would you have said if it had been cholera?"

"If it had been you certainly couldn't have made your way home this morning."

She went to the dressing-table and passed the comb through her shingled hair. She wanted to gain time. Then, sitting down, she lit a cigarette.

"I wasn't very well this morning and the Mother Superior thought I'd better come back here. But I'm perfectly all right again. I shall go to the convent as usual to-morrow."

"What was the matter with you?"

"Didn't they tell you?"

"No.. The Mother Superior said that you must tell me yourself."

He did now what he did seldom; he looked her full in the face; his professional instincts were stronger than his personal. She hesitated. Then she forced herself to meet his eyes.

"I'm going to have a baby," she said.

She was accustomed to his habit of meeting with silence a statement which you would naturally expect to evoke an exclamation, but never had it seemed to her more devastating. He said nothing; he made no gesture; no movement on his face nor change of expression in his dark eyes indicated that he had heard. She felt suddenly inclined to cry. If a man loved his wife and his wife loved him, at such a moment they were drawn together by a poignant emotion. The silence was intolerable and she broke it.

"I don't know why it never occurred to me before. It was stupid of me, but . . . what with one thing and another . . ."

"How long have you . . . when do you expect to be confined?"

The words seemed to issue from his lips with difficulty. She felt that his throat was as dry as hers. It was a nuisance that her lips trembled so when she spoke; if he was not of stone it must excite his pity.

"I suppose I've been like this between two and three months."

"Am I the father?"

She gave a little gasp. There was just a shadow of a tremor in his voice; it was dreadful, that cold self-control of his which made the smallest token of emotion so shattering. She did not know why she thought suddenly of an instrument she had been shown in Hong-Kong upon which a needle oscillated a little and she had been told that this represented an earthquake a thousand miles away in which perhaps a thousand persons had lost their lives. She looked at him. He was ghastly pale. She had seen that pallor on him once, twice before. He was looking down, a little sideways.

"Well?"

She clasped her hands. She knew that if she could say yes it would mean everything in the world to him. He would believe her, of course he would believe her, because he wanted to; and then he would forgive. She knew how deep was his tenderness and how ready he was, for all his shyness, to expend it. She knew that

he was not vindictive; he would forgive her if she could but give him an excuse to, an excuse that touched his heart, and he would forgive completely. She could count on him never to throw the past in her teeth. Cruel he might be, cold and morbid, but he was neither mean nor petty. It would alter everything if she said yes.

And she had an urgent need for sympathy. The unexpected knowledge that she was with child had overwhelmed her with strange hopes and unforeseen desires. She felt weak, frightened a little, alone and very far from any friends. That morning, though she cared little for her mother, she had had a sudden craving to be with her. She needed help and consolation. She did not love Walter, she knew that she never could, but at this moment she longed with all her heart for him to take her in his arms so that she could lay her head on his breast; clinging to him she could have cried happily; she wanted him to kiss her and she wanted to twine her arms around his neck.

She began to weep. She had lied so much and she could lie so easily. What could a lie matter when it could only do good? A lie, a lie, what was a lie? It was so easy to say yes. She saw Walter's eyes melt and his arms outstretched towards her. She couldn't say it; she didn't know why, she just couldn't. All she had gone through during these bitter weeks, Charlie and his unkindness, the cholera and all these people dying, the nuns, oddly enough even that funny, drunken little Waddington, it all seemed to have changed her so that she did not know herself; though she was so deeply moved, some bystander in her soul seemed to watch her with terror and surprise. She *had* to tell the truth. It did not seem worth while to lie. Her thoughts wandered strangely: on a sudden she saw that dead beggar at the foot of the compound wall. Why should she think of him? She did not sob; the tears streamed down her face, quite easily, from wide eyes. At last she answered the question. He had asked her if he was the child's father.

"I don't know," she said.

He gave the ghost of a chuckle. It made Kitty shudder.

"It's a bit awkward, isn't it?"

His answer was characteristic, it was exactly what she would have expected him to say, but it made her heart sink. She wondered if he realised how hard it had been for her to tell the truth (at the same moment she recognised that it had not been in the least hard, but inevitable) and if he gave her credit for it. Her answer, *I don't know, I don't know*, hammered away in her head. It

was impossible now to take it back. She got her handkerchief from her bag and dried her eyes. They did not speak. There was a syphon on the table by her bed and he got her a glass of water. He brought it to her and held the glass while she drank. She noticed how thin his hand was, it was a fine hand, slender, with long fingers, but now it was nothing but skin and bone; it trembled a little: he could control his face, but his hand betrayed him.

"Don't mind my crying," she said. "It's nothing really; it's only that I can't help the water running out of my eyes."

She drank the water and he put the glass back. He sat down on a chair and lit a cigarette. He gave a little sigh. Once or twice before she had heard him sigh like that and it always gave her a catch at the heart. Looking at him now, for he was staring with abstracted gaze out of the window, she was surprised that she had not noticed before how terribly thin he had grown during the last weeks. His temples were sunken and the bones of his face showed through the skin. His clothes hung on him loosely as though they had been made for a larger man. Through his sunburn his face had a greenish pallor. He looked exhausted. He was working too hard, sleeping little and eating nothing. In her own grief and perturbation she found room to pity him. It was cruel to think that she could do nothing for him.

He put his hand over his forehead, as though his head were aching, and she had a feeling that in his brain too those words hammered madly: *I don't know, I don't know*. It was strange that this moody, cold and shy man should have such a natural affection for very little babies; most men didn't care much even for their own, but the nuns, touched and a little amused, had more than once spoken of it. If he felt like that about those funny little Chinese babies what would he have felt about his own? Kitty bit her lips in order to prevent herself from crying again.

He looked at his watch.

"I'm afraid I must go back to the city. I have a great deal to do to-day . . . Shall you be all right?"

"Oh, yes. Don't bother about me."

"I think you'd better not wait for me this evening. I may be very late and I'll get something to eat from Colonel Yü."

"Very well."

He rose.

"If I were you, I wouldn't try to do anything to-day. You'd better take it easy. Is there anything you want before I go?"

"No, thanks. I shall be quite all right."

He paused for an instant, as though he were undecided, and then, abruptly and without looking at her, took his hat and walked out of the room. She heard him go through the compound. She felt terribly alone. There was no need for self-restraint now and gave herself up to a passion of tears.

CHAPTER LVII

THE night was sultry and Kitty sat at the window looking at the fantastic roofs, dark against the starlight, of the Chinese temple, when at last Walter came in. Her eyes were heavy with weeping, but she was composed. Notwithstanding all there was to harass her she felt, perhaps only from exhaustion, strangely at peace.

"I thought you'd be already in bed," said Walter as he came in.

"I wasn't sleepy. I thought it cooler to sit up. Have you had any dinner?"

"All I want."

He walked up and down the long room and she saw that he had something to say to her. She knew that he was embarrassed. Without concern she waited for him to summon up his resolution. He began abruptly.

"I've been thinking about what you told me this afternoon. It seems to me that it would be better if you went away. I have spoken to Colonel Yü and he will give you an escort. You could take the amah with you. You will be quite safe."

"Where is there for me to go?"

"You can go to your mother's."

"Do you think she would be pleased to see me?"

He paused for a moment, hesitating, as though for reflection.

"Then you can go to Hong-Kong."

"What should I do there?"

"You will need a good deal of care and attention. I don't think it's fair to ask you to stay here."

She could not prevent the smile, not only of bitterness but of frank amusement, that crossed her face. She gave him a glance and very nearly laughed.

"I don't know why you should be so anxious about my health."

He came over to the window and stood looking out at the night. There had never been so many stars in the unclouded sky.

"This isn't the place for a woman in your condition."

She looked at him, white in his thin clothes against the darkness; there was something sinister in his fine profile, and yet oddly enough at this moment it excited in her no fear.

"When you insisted on my coming here did you want it to kill me?" she asked suddenly.

He was so long answering that she thought he had refused to hear.

"At first."

She gave a little shudder, for it was the first time he had admitted his intention. But she bore him no ill will for it. Her feeling surprised herself; there was a certain admiration in it and a faint amusement. She did not quite know why, but suddenly thinking of Charlie Townsend he seemed to her an abject fool.

"It was a terrible risk you were taking," she answered. "With your sensitive conscience I wonder if you could ever have forgiven yourself if I had died."

"Well, you haven't. You've thrived on it."

"I've never felt better in my life."

She had an instinct to throw herself on the mercy of his humour. After all they had gone through, when they were living amid these scenes of horror and desolation, it seemed inept to attach importance to the ridiculous act of fornication. When death stood round the corner, taking lives like a gardener digging up potatoes, it was foolishness to care what dirty things this person or that did with his body. If she could only make him realise how little Charlie meant to her, so that now already she had difficulty in calling up his features to her imagination, and how entirely the love of him had passed out of her heart! Because she had no feeling for Townsend the various acts she had committed with him had lost their significance. She had regained her heart and what she had given of her body seemed not to matter a rap. She was inclined to say to Walter: "Look here, don't you think we've been silly long enough? We've sulked with one another like children. Why can't we kiss and be friends? There's no reason why we shouldn't be friends just because we're not lovers."

He stood very still and the lamplight made the pallor of his impassive face startling. She did not trust him; if she said the wrong thing he would turn upon her with such an icy sternness.

She knew by now his extreme sensitiveness, for which his acid irony was a protection, and how quickly he could close his heart if his feelings were hurt. She had a moment's irritation at his stupidity. Surely what troubled him most was the wound to his vanity: she vaguely realised that this is the hardest of all wounds to heal. It was singular that men attached so much importance to their wives' faithfulness; when first she had gone with Charlie she had expected to feel quite different, a changed woman; but she had seemed to herself exactly the same, she had experienced only well-being and a greater vitality. She wished now that she had been able to tell Walter that the child was his; the lie would have meant so little to her, and the assurance would have been so great a comfort to him. And after all it might not be a lie: it was funny, that something in her heart which had prevented her from giving herself the benefit of the doubt. How silly men were! Their part in procreation was so unimportant; it was the woman who carried the child through long months of uneasiness and bore it with pain, and yet a man because of his momentary connection made such preposterous claims. Why should that make any difference to him in his feeling toward the child? Then Kitty's thoughts wandered to the child which she herself would bear; she thought of it not with emotion nor with a passion of maternity, but with an idle curiosity.

"I dare say you'd like to think it over a little," said Walter, breaking the long silence.

"Think what?"

He turned a little as if he were surprised.

"About when you want to go."

"But I don't want to go."

"Why not?"

"I like my work at the convent. I think I'm making myself useful. I should prefer to stay as long as you do."

"I think I should tell you that in your present condition you are probably more liable to catch any infection that happen to be about."

"I like the discreet way you put it," she smiled ironically.

"You're not staying for my sake?"

She hesitated. He little knew that now the strongest emotion he excited in her, and the most unexpected, was pity.

"No. You don't love me. I often think I rather bore you."

"I shouldn't have thought you were the sort of person to put

yourself out for a few stuffy nuns and a parcel of Chinese brats."

Her lips outlined a smile.

"I think it's rather unfair to despise me so much because you made such a mistake in your judgment of me. It's not my fault that you were such an ass."

"If you're determined to stay you are of course at liberty to do so."

"I'm sorry I can't give you the opportunity of being magnanimous." She found it strangely hard to be quite serious with him. "As a matter of fact you're quite right, it's not only for the orphans that I'm staying: you see, I'm in the peculiar position that I haven't got a soul in the world that I can go to. I know no one who wouldn't think me a nuisance. I know no one who cares a row of pins if I'm alive or dead."

He frowned. But he did not frown in anger.

"We have made a dreadful hash of things, haven't we?" he said.

"Do you still want to divorce me? I don't think I care any more."

"You must know that by bringing you here I've condoned the offence."

"I didn't know. You see, I haven't made a study of infidelity. What are we going to do, then, when we leave here? Are we going on living together?"

"Oh, don't you think we can let the future take care of itself?"

There was the weariness of death in his voice.

CHAPTER LVIII

Two or three days later Waddington fetched Kitty from the convent (for her restlessness had induced her immediately to resume her work) and took her to drink the promised cup of tea with his mistress. Kitty had on more than one occasion dined at Waddington's house. It was a square, white and pretentious building, such as the Customs build for their officials all over China; and the dining-room in which they ate, the drawing-room in which they sat, were furnished with prim and solid furniture. They had the appearance of being partly offices and partly hotel; there was nothing homelike in them and you understood that these houses were merely places of haphazard sojourn to their successive

occupants. It would never have occurred to you that on an upper floor mystery and perhaps romance dwelt shrouded. They ascended a flight of stairs and Waddington opened a door. Kitty went into a large, bare room with whitewashed walls on which hung scrolls in various calligraphies. At a square table, on a stiff arm-chair, both of black-wood and heavily carved, sat the Manchu. She rose as Kitty and Waddington entered, but made no step forward.

"Here she is," said Waddington, and added something in Chinese."

Kitty shook hands with her. She was slim in her long embroidered gown and somewhat taller than Kitty, used to the Southern people, had expected. She wore a jacket of pale green silk with tight sleeves that came over her wrists and on her black hair, elaborately dressed, was the head-dress of the Manchu women. Her face was coated with powder and her cheeks from the eyes to the mouth heavily rouged; her plucked eyebrows were a thin dark line and her mouth was scarlet. From this mask her black, slightly slanting, large eyes burned like lakes of liquid jet. She seemed more like an idol than a woman. Her movements were slow and assured. Kitty had the impression that she was slightly shy but very curious. She nodded her head two or three times, looking at Kitty, while Waddington spoke of her. Kitty noticed her hands; they were preternaturally long, very slender, of the colour of ivory; and the exquisite nails were painted. Kitty thought she had never seen anything so lovely as those languid and elegant hands. They suggested the breeding of uncounted centuries.

She spoke a little, in a high voice, like the twittering of birds in an orchard, and Waddington, translating, told Kitty that she was glad to see her; how old was she and how many children had she got? They sat down on three straight chairs at the square table and a boy brought in bowls of tea, pale and scented with jasmine. The Manchu lady handed Kitty a green tin of Three Castles cigarettes. Beside the table and the chairs the room contained little furniture; there was a wide pallet bed on which was an embroidered head-rest and two sandalwood chests.

"What does she do with herself all day long?" asked Kitty.

"She paints a little and sometimes she writes a poem. But she mostly sits. She smokes, but only in moderation, which is fortunate, since one of my duties is to prevent the traffic in opium."

"Do you smoke?" asked Kitty.

"Seldom. To tell you the truth I much prefer whisky."

There was in the room a faintly acrid smell; it was not unpleasant, but peculiar and exotic.

"Tell her that I am sorry I cannot talk to her. I am sure we have many things to say to one another."

When this was translated to the Manchu she gave Kitty a quick glance in which there was the hint of a smile. She was impressive as she sat, without embarrassment, in her beautiful clothes; and from the painted face the eyes looked out wary, self-possessed and unfathomable. She was unreal, like a picture, and yet had an elegance which made Kitty feel all thumbs. Kitty had never paid anything but passing and somewhat contemptuous attention to the China in which fate had thrown her. It was not done in her set. Now she seemed on a sudden to have an inkling of something remote and mysterious. Here was the East, immemorial, dark and inscrutable. The beliefs and the ideals of the West seemed crude beside ideals and beliefs of which in this exquisite creature she seemed to catch a fugitive glimpse. Here was a different life, lived on a different plane. Kitty felt strangely that the sight of this idol, with her painted face and slanting, wary eyes, made the efforts and the pains of the everyday world she knew slightly absurd. That coloured mask seemed to hide the secret of an abundant profound and significant experience: those long, delicate hands with their tapering fingers held the key of riddles undivined.

"What does she think about all day long?" asked Kitty.

"Nothing," smiled Waddington.

"She's wonderful. Tell her I've never seen such beautiful hands. I wonder what she sees in you."

Waddington, smiling, translated the question.

"She says I'm good."

"As if a woman ever loved a man for his virtue!" Kitty mocked.

The Manchu laughed but once. This was when Kitty, for something to say, expressed admiration of a jade bracelet she wore. She took it off and Kitty, trying to put it on, found, though her hands were small enough, that it would not pass over her knuckles. Then the Manchu burst into childlike laughter. She said something to Waddington and called for an amah. She gave her an instruction and the amah in a moment brought in a pair of very beautiful Manchu shoes.

"She wants to give you these if you can wear them," said

Waddington. "You'll find they make quite good bedroom slippers."

"They fit me perfectly," said Kitty, not without satisfaction.

But she noticed a roguish smile on Waddington's face.

"Are they too big for her?" she asked quickly.

"Miles."

Kitty laughed and, when Waddington translated, the Manchu and the amah laughed also.

When Kitty and Waddington, a little later, were walking up the hill together, she turned to him with a friendly smile.

"You did not tell me that you had a great affection for her."

"What makes you think I have?"

"I saw it in your eyes. It's strange, it must be like loving a phantom or a dream. Men are incalculable; I thought you were like everybody else and now I feel that I don't know the first thing about you."

As they reached the bungalow he asked her abruptly:

"Why did you want to see her?"

Kitty hesitated for a moment before answering.

"I'm looking for something and I don't quite know what it is. But I know that it's very important for me to know it, and if I did it would make all the difference. Perhaps the nuns know it; when I'm with them I feel that they hold a secret which they will not share with me. I don't know why it came into my head that if I saw this Manchu woman I should have an inkling of what I am looking for. Perhaps she would tell me if she could."

"What makes you think she knows it?"

Kitty gave him a sidelong glance, but did not answer. Instead she asked him a question.

"Do you know it?"

He smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"Tao. Some of us look for the Way in opium and some in God, some of us in whisky and some in love. It is all the same Way and it leads nowhither."

CHAPTER LIX

Kitty fell again into the comfortable routine of her work and though in the early morning feeling far from well she had spirit

enough not to let it discompose her. She was astonished at the interest the nuns took in her: Sisters who, when she saw them in a corridor, had done no more than bid her good-morning now on a flimsy pretext came into the room in which she was occupied and looked at her, chatting a little, with a sweet and childlike excitement. Sister St. Joseph told her with a repetition which was sometimes tedious how she had been saying to herself for days past: "Now, I wonder," or: "I shouldn't be surprised"; and then, when Kitty fainted: "There can be no doubt, it jumps to the eyes." She told Kitty long stories of her sister-in-law's confinements, which but for Kitty's quick sense of humour would have been not a little alarming. Sister St. Joseph combined in a pleasant fashion the realistic outlook of her upbringing (a river wound through the meadows of her father's farm and the poplars that stood on its bank trembled in the faintest breeze) with a charming intimacy with religious things. One day, firmly convinced that a heretic could know nothing of such matters, she told Kitty of the Annunciation.

"I can never read those lines in the Holy Writ without weeping," she said. "I do not know why, but it gives me such a funny feeling."

And then in French, in words that to Kitty sounded unfamiliar and in their precision a trifle cold, she quoted:

"And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women."

The mystery of birth blew through the convent like a little fitful wind playing among the white blossoms of an orchard. The thought that Kitty was with child disturbed and excited those sterile women. She frightened them a little now and fascinated them. They looked upon the physical side of her condition with robust commonsense, for they were the daughters of peasants and fishermen; but in their childlike hearts was awe. They were troubled by the thought of her burden and yet happy and strangely exalted. Sister St. Joseph told her that they all prayed for her, and Sister St. Martin had said what a pity it was she was not a Catholic; but the Mother Superior had reproved her; she said that it was possible to be a good woman—*une brave femme*, she put it—even though one was Protestant and *le Bon Dieu* would in some way or other arrange all that.

Kitty was both touched and diverted by the interest she aroused, but surprised beyond measure when she found that even the

Mother Superior, so austere in her saintliness, treated her with a new complaisance. She had always been kind to Kitty, but in a remote fashion; now she used her with a tenderness in which there was something maternal. Her voice had in it a new and gentle note and in her eyes was a sudden playfulness as though Kitty were a child who had done a clever and amusing thing. It was oddly moving. Her soul was like a calm, grey sea rolling majestically, awe-inspiring in its sombre greatness, and then suddenly a ray of sunshine made it alert, friendly and gay. Often now in the evening she would come and sit with Kitty.

"I must take care that you do not tire yourself, *mon enfant*," she said, making a transparent excuse to herself, "or Dr. Fane will never forgive me. Oh, this British self-control! There he is delighted beyond measure and when you speak to him of it he becomes quite pale."

She took Kitty's hand and patted it affectionately.

"Dr. Fane told me that he wished you to go away, but you would not because you could not bear to leave us. That was kind of you, my dear child, and I want you to know that we appreciate the help you have been to us. But I think that you did not want to leave him either, and that is better, for your place is by his side, and he needs you. Ah, I do not know what we should have done without that admirable man."

"I am glad to think that he has been able to do something for you," said Kitty.

"You must love him with all your heart, my dear. He is a saint."

Kitty smiled and in her heart sighed. There was only one thing she could do for Walter now and that she could not think how to. She wanted him to forgive her, not for her sake any more, but for his own; for she felt that this alone could give him peace of mind. It was useless to ask him for his forgiveness, and if he had a suspicion that she desired it for his good rather than hers his stubborn vanity would make him refuse at all costs (it was curious that his vanity now did not irritate her, it seemed natural and only made her sorer for him), and the only chance was that some unexpected occurrence might throw him off his guard. She had an idea that he would welcome an uprush of emotion which would liberate him from his nightmare of resentment, but that, in his pathetic folly, he would fight when it came with all his might against it.

Was it not pitiful that men, tarrying so short a space in a world where there was so much pain, should thus torture themselves?

CHAPTER LX

THOUGH the Mother Superior talked with Kitty not more than three or four times and once or twice for but ten minutes the impression she made upon Kitty was profound. Her character was like a country which on first acquaintance seems grand, but inhospitable; but in which presently you discover smiling little villages among fruit trees in the folds of the majestic mountains, and pleasant ambling rivers that flow kindly through lush meadows. But these comfortable scenes, though they surprise and even reassure you, are not enough to make you feel at home in the land of tawny heights and wind-swept spaces. It would have been impossible to become intimate with the Mother Superior; she had that something impersonal about her which Kitty had felt with the other nuns, even with the good-humoured, chaty Sister St. Joseph, but with her it was a barrier which was almost palpable. It gave you quite a curious sensation, chilling but awe-inspiring, that she could walk on the same earth as you, attend to mundane affairs, and yet live so obviously upon a plane you could not reach. She once said to Kitty:

"It is not enough that a religious should be continually in prayer with Jesus; she should be herself a prayer."

Though her conversation was interwoven with her religion, Kitty felt that this was natural to her and that no effort was made to influence the heretic. It seemed strange to her that the Mother Superior, with her deep sense of charity, should be content to leave Kitty in a condition of what must seem to her sinful ignorance.

One evening the two of them were sitting together. The days were shortening now and the mellow light of the evening was agreeable and a little melancholy. The Mother Superior looked very tired. Her tragic face was drawn and white; her fine dark eyes had lost their fire. Her fatigue perhaps urged her to a rare mood of confidence.

"This is a memorable day for me, my child," she said, breaking from a long reverie, "for this is the anniversary of the day on which I finally determined to enter religion. For two years I had

been thinking of it, but I had suffered as it were a fear of this calling, for I dreaded that I might be recaptured by the spirit of the world. But that morning when I communicated I made the vow that I would before nightfall announce my wish to my dear mother. After I had received the Holy Communion I asked Our Lord to give me peace of mind: Thou shalt have it only, the answer seemed to come to me, when thou hast ceased to desire it."

The Mother Superior seemed to lose herself in thoughts of the past.

"That day, one of our friends, Madame de Viernot, had left for the Carmel without telling any of her relatives. She knew that they were opposed to her step, but she was a widow and thought that as such she had the right to do as she chose. One of my cousins had gone to bid farewell to the dear fugitive and did not come back till the evening. She was much moved. I had not spoken to my mother, I trembled at the thought of telling her what I had in mind, and yet I wished to keep the resolution I had made at Holy Communion. I asked my cousin all manner of questions. My mother, who appeared to be absorbed in her tapestry, lost no word. While I talked I said to myself: If I want to speak to-day I have not a minute to lose.

"It is strange how vividly I remember the scene. We were sitting round the table, a round table covered with a red cloth, and we worked by the light of a lamp with a green shade. My two cousins were staying with us and we were all working at tapestries to re-cover the chairs in the drawing-room. Imagine, they had not been re-covered since the days of Louis XIV, when they were bought, and they were so shabby and faded, my mother said it was a disgrace.

"I tried to form the words, but my lips would not move; and then, suddenly, after a few minutes of silence my mother said to me: 'I really cannot understand the conduct of your friend. I do not like this leaving without a word all those to whom she is so dear. The gesture is theatrical and offends my taste. A well-bred woman does nothing which shall make people talk of her. I hope that if ever you caused us the great sorrow of leaving us you would not take flight as though you were committing a crime.'

"It was the moment to speak, but such was my weakness that I could only say: 'Ah, set your mind at rest, *maman*, I should not have the strength.'

"My mother made no answer and I repented because I had not dared to explain myself. I seemed to hear the word of Our Lord to St. Peter: 'Peter, lovest thou me?' Oh, what weakness, what ingratitude was mine! I loved my comfort, the manner of my life, my family and my diversions. I was lost in these bitter thoughts when a little later, as though the conversation had not been interrupted, my mother said to me: 'Still, my Odette, I do not think that you will die without having done something that will endure.'

"I was still lost in my anxiety and my reflections, while my cousins, never knowing the beating of my heart, worked quietly, when suddenly my mother, letting her tapestry fall and looking at me attentively, said: 'Ah, my dear child, I am very sure that you will end by becoming a religious.'

" 'Are you speaking seriously, my good mother,' I answered. 'You are laying bare the innermost thought and desire of my heart.'

" 'Mais oui,' cried my cousins without giving me time to finish, 'for two years Odette has thought of nothing else. But you will not give your permission, *ma tante*, you must not give your permission.'

" 'By what right, my dear children, should we refuse it,' said my mother, 'if it is the Will of God?'

"My cousins then, wishing to make a jest of the conversation, asked me what I intended to do with the trifles that belonged to me and quarrelled gaily about which should take possession of this and which of that. But these first moments of gaiety lasted a very little while and we began to weep. Then we heard my father come up the stairs."

The Mother Superior paused for a moment and sighed.

"It was very hard for my father. I was his only daughter and men often have a deeper feeling for their daughters than they ever have for their sons."

"It is a great misfortune to have a heart," said Kitty, with a smile.

"It is a great good fortune to consecrate that heart to the love of Jesus Christ."

At that moment a little girl came up to the Mother Superior and confident in her interest showed her a fantastic toy that she had somehow got hold of. The Mother Superior put her beautiful, delicate hand round the child's shoulder and the child

nestled up to her. It moved Kitty to observe how sweet her smile was and yet how impersonal.

"It is wonderful to see the adoration that all your orphans have for you, Mother," she said. "I think I should be very proud if I could excite so great a devotion."

The Mother Superior gave once more her aloof and yet beautiful smile.

"There is only one way to win hearts and that is to make oneself like unto those of whom one would be loved."

CHAPTER LXI

WALTER did not come back to dinner that evening. Kitty waited for him a little, for when he was detained in the city he always managed to send her word, but at last she sat down. She made no more than a pretence of eating the many courses which the Chinese cook, with his regard for propriety notwithstanding pestilence and the difficulty of provisioning, invariably set before her; and then, sinking into the long rattan chair by the open window, surrendered herself to the beauty of the starry night. The silence rested her.

She did not try to read. Her thoughts floated upon the surface of her mind like little white clouds reflected on a still lake. She was too tired to seize upon one, follow it up and absorb herself in its attendant train. She wondered vaguely what there was for her in the various impressions which her conversations with the nuns had left upon her. It was singular that, though their way of life so profoundly moved her, the faith which occasioned it left her untouched. She could not envisage the possibility that she might at any time be captured by the ardour of belief. She gave a little sigh: perhaps it would make everything easier if that great white light should illuminate her soul. Once or twice she had had the desire to tell the Mother Superior of her unhappiness and its cause; but she dared not: she could not bear that this austere woman should think ill of her. To her what she had done would naturally seem a grievous sin. The odd thing was that she herself could not regard it as wicked so much as stupid and ugly.

Perhaps it was due to an obtuseness in herself that she looked upon her connection with Townsend as regrettable, and shocking

even, but to be forgotten rather than to be repented of. It was like making a blunder at a party; there was nothing to do about it, it was dreadfully mortifying, but it showed a lack of sense to ascribe too much importance to it. She shuddered as she thought of Charlie with his large frame too well covered, the vagueness of his jaw and the way he had of standing with his chest thrown out so that he might not seem to have a paunch. His sanguine temperament showed itself in the little red veins which soon would form a network on his ruddy cheeks. She had liked his bushy eyebrows: there was to her in them now something animal and repulsive.

And the future? It was curious how indifferent it left her; she could not see into it at all. Perhaps she would die when her baby was born. Her sister Doris had always been much stronger than she, and Doris had nearly died. (She had done her duty and produced an heir to the new baronetcy; Kitty smiled as she thought of her mother's satisfaction.) If the future was so vague it meant perhaps that she was destined never to see it. Walter would probably ask her mother to take care of the child—if the child survived; and she knew him well enough to be sure that, however uncertain of his paternity, he would treat it with kindness. Walter could be trusted under any circumstances to behave admirably. It was a pity that with his great qualities, his unselfishness and honour, his intelligence and sensibility, he should be so unlovable. She was not in the least frightened of him now, but sorry for him and at the same time she could not help thinking him slightly absurd. The depth of his emotion made him vulnerable and she had a feeling that somehow and at some time she so could work upon it as to induce him to forgive her. The thought haunted her now that in thus giving him peace of mind she would make the only possible amends for the anguish she had caused him. It was a pity he had so little sense of humour: she could see them both, some day, laughing together at the way they had tormented themselves.

She was tired. She took the lamp into her room and undressed. She went to bed and presently fell asleep.

CHAPTER LXII

BUT she was awakened by a loud knocking. At first, since it was interwoven with the dream from which she was aroused, she could not attach the sound to reality. The knocking went on and she was conscious that it must be at the gateway of the compound. It was quite dark. She had a watch with phosphorised hands and saw that it was half-past two. It must be Walter coming back—how late he was!—and he could not awake the boy. The knocking went on, louder and louder, and in the silence of the night it was really not a little alarming. The knocking stopped and she heard the withdrawing of the heavy bolt. Walter had never come back so late. Poor thing, he must be tired out! She hoped he would have the sense to go straight to bed instead of working as usual in that laboratory of his.

There was a sound of voices, and people came into the compound. That was strange, for Walter coming home late, in order not to disturb her, took pains to be quiet. Two or three persons ran swiftly up the wooden steps and came into the room next door. Kitty was a little frightened. At the back of her mind was always the fear of an anti-foreign riot. Had something happened? Her heart began to beat quickly. But before she had time to put her vague apprehension into shape someone walked across the room and knocked at her door.

"Mrs. Fane."

She recognised Waddington's voice.

"Yes. What is it?"

"Will you get up at once. I have something to say to you."

She rose and put on a dressing-gown. She unlocked the door and opened it. Her glance took in Waddington in a pair of Chinese trousers and a pongee coat, the house-boy holding a hurricane lamp, and a little further back three Chinese soldiers in khaki. She started as she saw the consternation on Waddington's face; his head was tousled as though he had just jumped out of bed.

"What is the matter?" she gasped.

"You must keep calm. There's not a moment to lose. Put on your clothes at once and come with me."

"But what is it? Has something happened in the city?"

The sight of the soldiers suggested to her at once that

there had been an outbreak and they were come to protect her.

"Your husband's been taken ill. We want you to come at once."

"Walter?" she cried.

"You mustn't be upset. I don't exactly know what's the matter. Colonel Yü sent this officer to me and asked me to bring you to the Yamen at once."

Kitty stared at him for a moment, she felt a sudden cold in her heart, and then she turned.

"I shall be ready in two minutes."

"I came just as I was," he answered. "I was asleep, I just put on a coat and some shoes."

She did not hear what he said. She dressed by the light of the stars, taking the first things that came to hand; her fingers on a sudden were so clumsy that it seemed to take her an age to find the little clasps that closed her dress. She put round her shoulders the Cantonese shawl she had worn in the evening.

"I haven't put a hat on. There's no need, is there?"

"No."

The boy held the lantern in front of them and they hurried down the steps and out of the compound gate.

"Take care you don't fall," said Waddington. "You'd better hang on to my arm."

The soldiers followed immediately behind them.

"Colonel Yü has sent chairs. They're waiting on the other side of the river."

They walked quickly down the hill. Kitty could not bring herself to utter the question that trembled so horribly on her lips. She was mortally afraid of the answer. They came to the bank and there, with a thread of light at the bow, a sampan was waiting for them.

"Is it cholera?" she said then.

"I'm afraid so."

She gave a little cry and stopped short.

"I think you ought to come as quickly as you can." He gave her his hand to help her into the boat. The passage was short and the river almost stagnant; they stood in a bunch at the bow, while a woman with a child tied on her hip with one oar impelled the sampan across.

"He was taken ill this afternoon, the afternoon of yesterday that is," said Waddington.

"Why wasn't I sent for at once?"

Although there was no reason for it they spoke in whispers. In the darkness Kitty could only feel how intense was her companion's anxiety.

"Colonel Yü wanted to, but he wouldn't let him. Colonel Yü has been with him all the time."

"He ought to have sent for me all the same. It's heartless."

"Your husband knew that you had never seen anyone with cholera. It's a terrible and revolting sight. He didn't want you to see it."

"After all he is my husband," she said in a choking voice.

Waddington made no reply.

"Why am I allowed to come now?"

Waddington put his hand on her arm.

"My dear, you must be very brave. You must be prepared for the worst."

She gave a wail of anguish and turned away a little, for she saw that the three Chinese soldiers were looking at her. She had a sudden strange glimpse of the whites of their eyes.

"Is he dying?"

"I only know the message Colonel Yü gave to this officer who came and fetched me. As far as I can judge collapse has set in."

"Is there no hope at all?"

"I'm dreadfully sorry, I'm afraid that if we don't get there quickly we shan't find him alive."

She shuddered. The tears began to stream down her cheeks.

"You see, he's been overworking, he has no powers of resistance."

She withdrew from the pressure of his arm with a gesture of irritation. It exasperated her that he should talk in that low, anguished voice.

They reached the side and two men, Chinese coolies, standing on the bank helped her to step on shore. The chairs were waiting. As she got into hers Waddington said to her:

"Try and keep a tight hold on your nerves. You'll want all your self-control."

"Tell the bearers to make haste."

"They have orders to go as fast as they can."

The officer, already in his chair, passed by and as he passed called out to Kitty's bearers. They raised the chair smartly, arranged the poles on their shoulders, and at a swift pace set off.

Waddington followed close behind. They took the hill at a run, a man with a lantern going before each chair, and at the water-gate the gatekeeper was standing with a torch. The officer shouted to him as they approached and he flung open one side of the gate to let them through. He uttered some sort of interjection as they passed and the bearers called back. In the dead of the night those guttural sounds in a strange language were mysterious and alarming. They slithered up the wet and slippery cobbles of the alley and one of the officer's bearers stumbled. Kitty heard the officer's voice raised in anger, the shrill retort of the bearer, and then the chair in front hurried on again. The streets were narrow and tortuous. Here in the city was deep night. It was a city of the dead. They hastened along a narrow lane, turned a corner, and then at a run took a flight of steps; the bearers were beginning to blow hard; they walked with long, rapid strides, in silence; one took out a ragged handkerchief and as he walked wiped from his forehead the sweat that ran down into his eyes; they wound this way and that so that it might have been a maze through which they sped; in the shadow of the shuttered shops sometimes a form seemed to be lying, but you did not know whether it was a man who slept to awake at dawn or a man who slept to awake never; the narrow streets were ghostly in their silent emptiness and when on a sudden a dog barked loudly it sent a shock of terror through Kitty's tortured nerves. She did not know where they went. The way seemed endless. Could they not go faster? Faster. Faster. The time was going and any moment it might be too late.

CHAPTER LXIII

SUDDENLY, walking along a blank long wall, they came to a gateway flanked by sentry-boxes, and the bearers set down the chairs. Waddington hurried up to Kitty. She had already jumped out. The officer knocked loudly on the door and shouted. A postern was opened and they passed into a courtyard. It was large and square. Huddled against the walls, under the eaves of the overhanging roofs, soldiers wrapped in their blankets were lying in huddled groups. They stopped for a moment while the officer spoke to a man who might have been a sergeant on guard. He turned and said something to Waddington.

"He's still alive," said Waddington in a low voice. "Take care how you walk."

Still preceded by the men with lanterns they made their way across the yard, up some steps, through a great doorway and then down into another wide court. On one side of this was a long chamber with lights in it; the lights within shining through the rice-paper silhouetted the elaborate pattern of the lattice. The lantern-bearers led them across the yard towards this room and at the door the officer knocked. It was opened immediately and the officer with a glance at Kitty stepped back.

"Will you walk in," said Waddington.

It was a long, low room and the smoky lamps that lit it made the gloom ominous. Three or four orderlies stood about. On a pallet against the wall opposite the door a man was lying huddled under a blanket. An officer was standing motionless at the foot.

Kitty hurried up and leaned over the pallet. Walter lay with his eyes closed and in that sombre light his face had the greyness of death. He was horribly still.

"Walter, Walter," she gasped, in a low, terrified tone.

There was a slight movement in the body, or the shadow of a movement; it was so slight it was like a breath of air which you cannot feel and yet for an instant ruffles the surface of still water.

"Walter, Walter, speak to me."

The eyes were opened slowly, as though it were an infinite effort to raise those heavy lids, but he did not look, he stared at the wall a few inches from his face. He spoke; his voice, low and weak, had the hint of a smile in it.

"This is a pretty kettle of fish," he said.

Kitty dared not breathe. He made no further sound, no beginning of a gesture, but his eyes, those dark, cold eyes of his (seeing now what mysteries?) stared at the whitewashed wall. Kitty raised herself to her feet. With haggard gaze she faced the man who stood there.

"Surely something can be done. You're not going to stand there and do nothing?"

She clasped her hands. Waddington spoke to the officer who stood at the end of the bed.

"I'm afraid they've done everything that was possible. The regimental surgeon has been treating him. Your husband has trained him and he's done all that your husband could do himself."

"Is that the surgeon?"

"No, that is Colonel Yü. He's never left your husband's side."

Distracted, Kitty gave him a glance. He was a tallish man, but stockily built, and he seemed ill at ease in his khaki uniform. He was looking at Walter and she saw that his eyes were wet with tears. It gave her a pang. Why should that man with his yellow, flat face have tears in his eyes? It exasperated her.

"It's awful to be able to do nothing."

"At least he's not in pain any more," said Waddington.

She leaned once more over her husband. Those ghastly eyes of his still stared vacantly in front of him. She could not tell if he saw with them. She did not know whether he had heard what was said. She put her lips close to his ears.

"Walter, isn't there something we can do?"

She thought that there must be some drug they could give him which would stay the dreadful ebbing of his life. Now that her eyes were more accustomed to the dimness she saw with horror that his face had fallen. She would hardly have recognised him. It was unthinkable that in a few short hours he should look like another man; he hardly looked like a man at all; he looked like death.

She thought that he was making an effort to speak. She put her ear close.

"Don't fuss. I've had a rough passage, but I'm all right now."

Kitty waited for a moment, but he was silent. His immobility rent her heart with anguish; it was terrifying that he should lie so still. He seemed prepared already for the stillness of the grave. Someone, the surgeon or a dresser, came forward and with a gesture motioned her aside; he leaned over the dying man and with a dirty rag wet his lips. Kitty stood up once more and turned to Waddington despairingly.

"Is there no hope at all?" she whispered.

He shook his head.

"How much longer can he live?"

"No one can tell. An hour perhaps."

Kitty looked round the bare chamber and her eyes rested for an instant on the substantial form of Colonel Yü.

"Can I be left alone with him for a little while?" she asked.

"Only for a minute."

"Certainly, if you wish it."

Waddington stepped over to the colonel and spoke to him. The colonel gave a little bow and then in a low tone an order.

"We shall wait on the steps," said Waddington as they trooped out. "You have only to call."

Now that the incredible had overwhelmed her consciousness, like a drug coursing through her veins, and she realised that Walter was going to die she had but one thought, and that was to make his end easier for him by dragging from his soul the rancour which poisoned it. If he could die at peace with her it seemed to her that he would die at peace with himself. She thought now not of herself at all but only of him.

"Walter, I beseech you to forgive me," she said, leaning over him. For fear that he could not bear the pressure she took care not to touch him. "I'm so desperately sorry for the wrong I did you. I so bitterly regret it."

He said nothing. He did not seem to hear. She was obliged to insist. It seemed to her strangely that his soul was a fluttering moth and its wings were heavy with hatred.

"Darling."

A shadow passed over his wan and sunken face. It was less than a movement, and yet it gave all the effect of a terrifying convulsion. She had never used that word to him before. Perhaps in his dying brain there passed the thought, confused and difficultly grasped, that he had only heard her use it, a commonplace of her vocabulary, to dogs and babies and motor-cars. Then something horrible occurred. She clenched her hands, trying with all her might to control herself, for she saw two tears run slowly down his wasted cheeks.

"Oh, my precious, my dear, if you ever loved me—I know you loved me and I was hateful—I beg you to forgive me. I've no chance now to show my repentance. Have mercy on me. I beseech you to forgive."

She stopped. She looked at him, all breathless, waiting passionately for a reply. She saw that he tried to speak. Her heart gave a great bound. It seemed to her that it would be in a manner a reparation for the suffering she had caused him if at this last moment she could effect his deliverance from that load of bitterness. His lips moved. He did not look at her. His eyes stared unseeing at the whitewashed wall. She leaned over him so that she might hear. But he spoke quite clearly.

"The dog it was that died."

She stayed as still as though she were turned to stone. She could not understand and gazed at him in terrified perplexity. It

was meaningless. Delirium. He had not understood a word she said.

It was impossible to be so still and yet to live. She stared and stared. His eyes were open. She could not tell if he breathed. She began to grow frightened.

"Walter," she whispered. "Walter."

At last, suddenly, she raised herself. A sudden fear seized her. She turned and went to the door.

"Will you come, please. He doesn't seem to . . ."

They stepped in. The Chinese surgeon went up to the bed. He had an electric torch in his hand and he lit it and looked at Walter's eyes. Then he closed them. He said something in Chinese. Waddington put his arm round Kitty.

"I'm afraid he's dead."

Kitty gave a deep sigh. A few tears fell from her eyes. She felt dazed rather than overcome. The Chinese stood about, round the bed, helplessly, as though they did not quite know what to do next. Waddington was silent. In a minute the Chinese began to speak in a low tone among themselves.

"You'd better let me take you back to the bungalow," said Waddington. "He'll be brought there."

Kitty passed her hand wearily across her forehead. She went up to the pallet bed and leaned over it. She kissed Walter gently on the lips. She was not crying now.

"I'm sorry to give you so much trouble."

The officers saluted as she passed and she gravely bowed. They walked back across the courtyard and got into their chairs. She saw Waddington light a cigarette. A little smoke lost in the air, that was the life of man.

CHAPTER LXIV

DAWN was breaking now, and here and there a Chinese was taking down the shutters of his shop. In its dark recesses, by the light of a taper, a woman was washing her hands and face. In a tea-house at a corner a group of men were eating an early meal. The grey, cold light of the rising day sidled along the narrow lanes like a thief. There was a pale mist on the river and the masts of the crowded junks loomed through it like the lances of a phantom army. It was

chilly as they crossed and Kitty huddled herself up in her gay and coloured shawl. They walked up the hill and they were above the mist. The sun shone from an unclouded sky. It shone as though this were a day like another and nothing had happened to distinguish it from its fellows.

"Wouldn't you like to lie down?" said Waddington when they entered the bungalow.

"No. I'll sit at the window."

She had sat at the window so often and so long during the weeks that had passed and her eyes now were so familiar with the fantastic, garish, beautiful and mysterious temple on its great bastion that it rested her spirit. It was so unreal, even in the crude light of mid-day, that it withdrew her from the reality of life.

"I'll get the boy to make you some tea. I'm afraid it will be necessary to bury him this morning. I'll make all arrangements."

"Thank you."

CHAPTER LXV

THEY buried him three hours later. It seemed horrible to Kitty that he must be put into a Chinese coffin, as though in so strange a bed he must rest uneasily, but there was no help for it. The nuns, learning of Walter's death as they learned everything that happened in the city, sent by a messenger a cross of dahlias, stiff and formal, but made as though by the accustomed hands of a florist; and the cross, alone on the Chinese coffin, looked grotesque and out of place. When all was ready they had to wait for Colonel Yü, who had sent to Waddington to say that he desired to attend the funeral. He came accompanied by an A.D.C. They walked up the hill, the coffin borne by half a dozen coolies, to a little plot of land where lay buried the missionary whose place Walter had taken. Waddington had found among the missionary's effects an English prayer-book and in a low voice, with an embarrassment that was unusual to him, read the burial service. Perhaps, reciting those solemn but terrible words, the thought hovered in his mind that if he in his turn fell a victim to the pestilence there would be no one now to say them over him. The coffin was lowered into the grave and the grave-diggers began to throw in the earth.

Colonel Yü, who had stood with bared head by the graveside, put on his hat, saluted Kitty gravely, said a word or two to

Waddington and, followed by his A.D.C., walked away. The coolies, curious to watch a Christian burial, had lingered and now in a straggling group, their yokes trailing in their hands, sauntered off. Kitty and Waddington waited till the grave was filled and then placed on the mound, smelling of fresh earth, the nuns' prim dahlias. She had not wept, but when the first shovelful of earth rattled on the coffin she felt a dreadful pang at her heart.

She saw that Waddington was waiting for her to come away.

"Are you in a hurry?" she asked. "I don't want to go back to the bungalow just yet."

"I have nothing to do. I am entirely in your hands."

CHAPTER LXVI

THEY sauntered along the causeway till they came to the top of the hill on which stood that archway, the memorial to a virtuous widow, which had occupied so large a part of Kitty's impression of the place. It was a symbol, but of what she scarcely knew; she could not tell why it bore a note of so sardonic irony.

"Shall we sit down a little? We haven't sat here for ages." The plain was spread before her widely; it was tranquil and serene in the morning light. "It's only a few weeks that I've been here and it seems a lifetime."

He did not answer and for a while she allowed her thoughts to wander. She gave a sigh.

"Do you think that the soul is immortal?" she asked.

He did not seem surprised at the question.

"How should I know?"

"Just now, when they'd washed Walter, before they put him into the coffin I looked at him. He looked very young. Too young to die. Do you remember that beggar that we saw the first time you took me for a walk? I was frightened not because he was dead, but because he looked as though he'd never been a human being. He was just a dead animal. And now again, with Walter, it looked so like a machine that has run down. That's what is so frightening. And if it is only a machine how futile is all this suffering and the heart pains and the misery!"

He did not answer, but his eyes travelled over the landscape at their feet. The wide expanse on that gay and sunny morning filled

the heart with exultation. The trim little rice-fields stretched as far as the eye could see and in many of them the blue-clad peasants with their buffaloes were working industriously. It was a peaceful and a happy scene. Kitty broke the silence.

"I can't tell you how deeply moved I've been by all I've seen at the convent. They're wonderful, those nuns, they make me feel utterly worthless. They give up everything, their home, their country, love, children, freedom; and all the little things which I sometimes think must be harder still to give up, flowers and green fields, going for a walk on an autumn day, books and music, comfort, everything they give up, everything. And they do it so that they may devote themselves to a life of sacrifice and poverty, obedience, killing work and prayer. To all of them this world is really and truly a place of exile. Life is a cross which they willingly bear, but in their hearts all the time is the desire—oh, it's so much stronger than desire, it's a longing, an eager, passionate longing for the death which shall lead them to life everlasting."

Kitty clasped her hands and looked at him with anguish.

"Well?"

"Supposing there is no life everlasting? Think what it means if death is really the end of all things. They've given up all for nothing. They've been cheated. They're dupes."

Waddington reflected for a little while.

"I wonder. I wonder if it matters that what they have aimed at is illusion. Their lives are in themselves beautiful. I have an idea that the only thing which makes it possible to regard this world we live in without disgust is the beauty which now and then men create out of the chaos. The pictures they paint, the music they compose, the books they write, and the lives they lead. Of all these the richest in beauty is the beautiful life. That is the perfect work of art."

Kitty sighed. What he said seemed hard. She wanted more.

"Have you ever been to a symphony concert?" he continued.

"Yes," she smiled. "I know nothing of music, but I'm rather fond of it."

"Each member of the orchestra plays his own little instrument, and what do you think he knows of the complicated harmonies which unroll themselves on the indifferent air? He is concerned only with his own small share. But he knows that the symphony is lovely, and though there's none to hear it, it is lovely still, and he is content to play his part."

"You spoke of Tao the other day," said Kitty, after a pause. "Tell me what it is."

Waddington gave her a little look, hesitated an instant, and then with a faint smile on his comic face answered:

"It is the Way and the Waygoer. It is the eternal road along which walk all beings, but no being made it, for itself is being. It is everything and nothing. From it all things spring, all things conform to it, and to it at last all things return. It is a square without angles, a sound which ears cannot hear, and an image without form. It is a vast net and though its meshes are as wide as the sea it lets nothing through. It is the sanctuary where all things find refuge. It is nowhere, but without looking out of the window you may see it. Desire not to desire, it teaches, and leave all things to take their course. He that humbles himself shall be preserved entire. He that bends shall be made straight. Failure is the foundation of success and success is the lurking-place of failure; but who can tell when the turning point will come? He who strives after tenderness can become even as a little child. Gentleness brings victory to him who attacks and safety to him who defends. Mighty is he who conquers himself."

"Does it mean anything?"

"Sometimes, when I've had half a dozen whiskies and look at the stars, I think perhaps it does."

Silence fell upon them, and when it was broken it was again by Kitty.

"Tell me, is 'The dog it was that died' a quotation?"

Waddington's lips outlined a smile and he was ready with his answer. But perhaps at that moment his sensibilities were abnormally acute. Kitty was not looking at him, but there was something about her expression which made him change his mind.

"If it is I don't know it," he answered warily. "Why?"

"Nothing. It crossed my mind. It had a familiar ring."

There was another silence.

"When you were alone with your husband," said Waddington presently, "I had a talk with the regimental surgeon. I thought we ought to have some details."

"Well?"

"He was in a very hysterical state. I couldn't really quite understand what he meant. So far as I can make out, your husband got infected during the course of experiments he was making."

"He was always experimenting. He wasn't really a doctor, he

was a bacteriologist; that is why he was so anxious to come here."

"But I can't quite make out from the surgeon's statements whether he was infected accidentally or whether he was actually experimenting on himself."

Kitty grew very pale. The suggestion made her shudder. Waddington took her hand.

"Forgive me for talking about this again," he said gently, "but I thought it might comfort you—I know how frightfully difficult it is on these occasions to say anything that is of the least use—I thought it might mean something to you that Walter died a martyr to science and to his duty."

Kitty shrugged her shoulders with a suspicion of impatience.

"Walter died of a broken heart," she said.

Waddington did not answer. She turned and looked at him slowly. Her face was white and set.

"What did he mean by saying 'The dog it was that died'? What is it?"

"It's the last line of Goldsmith's *Elegy*."

CHAPTER LXVII

NEXT morning Kitty went to the convent. The girl who opened the door seemed surprised to see her and when Kitty had been for a few minutes about her work the Mother Superior came in. She went up to Kitty and took her hand.

"I am glad to see you, my dear child. You show a fine courage in coming back here so soon after your great sorrow; and wisdom, for I am sure that a little work will keep you from brooding."

Kitty cast down her eyes, reddening a little; she did not want the Mother Superior to see into her heart.

"I need not tell you how sincerely all of us here sympathise with you."

"You are very kind," whispered Kitty.

"We all pray for you constantly and for the soul of him you have lost."

Kitty made no reply. The Mother Superior released her hand and in her cool, authoritative tone imposed various tasks upon her. She patted two or three children on the head, gave

them her aloof but winning smile, and went about her more pressing affairs.

CHAPTER LXVIII

A WEEK went by. Kitty was sewing. The Mother Superior entered the room and sat down beside her. She gave Kitty's work a shrewd glance.

"You sew very well, my dear. It is a rare accomplishment for young women of your world nowadays."

"I owe it to my mother."

"I am sure that your mother will be very glad to see you again."

Kitty looked up. There was that in the Mother Superior's manner which prevented the remark from being taken as a casual politeness. She went on.

"I allowed you to come here after the death of your dear husband because I thought occupation would distract your mind. I did not think you were fit at that moment to take the long journey to Hong-Kong by yourself, nor did I wish you to sit alone in your house with nothing to do but to remember your loss. But now eight days have passed. It is time for you to go."

"I don't want to go, Mother. I want to stay here."

"There is nothing for you to stay for. You came to be with your husband. Your husband is dead. You are in a condition in which you will shortly need a care and attention which it is impossible for you to get here. It is your duty, my dear child, to do everything in your power for the welfare of the being that God has entrusted to your care."

Kitty was silent for a moment. She looked down.

"I was under the impression that I was of some use here. It has been a great pleasure to me to think that I was. I hoped that you would allow me to go on with my work till the epidemic had come to an end."

"We are all very grateful for what you have done for us," answered the Superior, with a slight smile, "but now that the epidemic is waning the risk of coming here is not so great and I am expecting two Sisters from Canton. They should be here very shortly and when they arrive I do not think that I shall be able to make any use of your services."

Kitty's heart sank. The Mother Superior's tone admitted of no reply; she knew her well enough to know that she would be insensible to entreaty. That she found it necessary to reason with Kitty had brought into her voice a note, if hardly of irritation, at least of the peremptoriness which might lead to it.

"Mr. Waddington was good enough to ask my advice."

"I wish he could have minded his own business," interrupted Kitty.

"If he hadn't I should all the same have felt obliged to give it him," said the Mother Superior gently. "At the present moment your place is not here, but with your mother. Mr. Waddington has arranged with Colonel Yü to give you a strong escort so that you will be perfectly safe on the journey, and he has arranged for bearers and coolies. The amah will go with you and arrangements will be made at the cities you pass through. In fact, everything possible for your comfort has been done."

Kitty's lips tightened. She thought that they might at least have consulted her in a matter which only concerned herself. She had to exercise some self-control in order not to answer sharply.

"And when am I to start?"

The Mother Superior remained quite placid.

"The sooner you can get back to Hong-Kong and then sail to England the better, my dear child. We thought you would like to start at dawn the day after to-morrow."

"So soon."

Kitty felt a little inclined to cry. But it was true enough; she had no place there.

"You all seem in a great hurry to be rid of me," she said ruefully.

Kitty was conscious of a relaxation in the Superior's demeanour. She saw that Kitty was prepared to yield and unconsciously she assumed a more gracious tone. Kitty's sense of humour was acute and her eyes twinkled as she reflected that even the saints liked to have their own way.

"Don't think that I fail to appreciate the goodness of your heart, my dear child, and the admirable charity which makes you unwilling to abandon your self-imposed duties."

Kitty stared straight in front of her. She faintly shrugged her shoulders. She knew that she could ascribe to herself no such exalted virtues. She wanted to stay because she had nowhere else to go. It was a curious sensation this, that nobody

in the world cared two straws whether she was alive or dead.

"I cannot understand that you should be reluctant to go home," pursued the Superior amiably. "There are many foreigners in this country who would give a great deal to have your chance!"

"But not you, Mother?"

"Oh, with us it is different, my dear child. When we come here we know that we have left our homes for ever."

Out of her own wounded feelings emerged the desire in Kitty's mind, malicious perhaps, to seek the joint in the armour of faith which rendered the nuns so aloofly immune to all the natural feelings. She wanted to see whether there was left in the Superior any of the weakness of humanity.

"I should have thought that sometimes it was hard never to see again those that are dear to you and the scenes amid which you were brought up."

The Mother Superior hesitated for a moment, but Kitty watching her could see no change in the serenity of her beautiful and austere face.

"It is hard for my mother, who is old now, for I am her only daughter and she would dearly like to see me once more before she dies. I wish I could give her that joy. But it cannot be and we shall wait till we can meet in paradise."

"All the same, when one thinks of those to whom one is so dear, it must be difficult not to ask oneself if one was right in cutting oneself off from them."

"Are you asking me if I have ever regretted the step I took?" On a sudden the Mother Superior's face grew radiant. "Never, never. I have exchanged a life that was trivial and worthless for one of sacrifice and prayer."

There was a brief silence and then the Mother Superior, assuming a lighter manner, smiled.

"I am going to ask you to take a little parcel and post it for me when you get to Marseilles. I do not wish to entrust it to the Chinese post-office. I will fetch it at once."

"You can give it to me to-morrow," said Kitty.

"You will be too busy to come here to-morrow, my dear. It will be more convenient for you to bid us farewell to-night."

She rose and with the easy dignity which her voluminous habit could not conceal left the room. In a moment Sister St. Joseph came in. She was come to say good-bye. She hoped that Kitty

would have a pleasant journey; she would be quite safe, for Colonel Y^{et} was sending a strong escort with her; and the sisters constantly did the journey alone and no harm came to them. And did she like the sea? *Mon Dieu*, how ill she was when there was a storm in the Indian Ocean! *Madame* her mother would be pleased to see her daughter, and she must take care of herself; after all she had another little soul in her care now, and they would all pray for her; she would pray constantly for her and the dear little baby and for the soul of the poor, brave doctor. She was voluble, kindly, and affectionate; and yet Kitty was deeply conscious that for Sister St. Joseph (her gaze intent on eternity) she was but a wraith without body or substance. She had a wild impulse to seize the stout, good-natured nun by the shoulders and shake her, crying: "Don't you know that I'm a human being, unhappy and alone, and I want comfort and sympathy and encouragement; oh, can't you turn a minute away from God and give me a little compassion; not the Christian compassion that you have for all suffering things, but just human compassion for me?" The thought brought a smile to Kitty's lips: how very surprised Sister St. Joseph would be! She would certainly be convinced of what now she only suspected, that all English people were mad.

"Fortunately I am a very good sailor," Kitty answered. "I've never been sea-sick yet."

The Mother Superior returned with a small, neat parcel.

"They're handkerchiefs that I've had made for the name-day of my mother," she said. "The initials have been embroidered by our young girls."

Sister St. Joseph suggested that Kitty would like to see how beautifully the work was done and the Mother Superior with an indulgent, deprecating smile untied the parcel. The handkerchiefs were of very fine lawn and the initials embroidered in a complicated cipher were surmounted by a crown of strawberry leaves. When Kitty had properly admired the workmanship the handkerchiefs were wrapped up again and the parcel handed to her. Sister St. Joseph, with an "*Eh bien, Madame, je vous quitte*" and a repetition of her polite and impersonal salutations, went away. Kitty realised that this was the moment to take her leave of the Superior. She thanked her for her kindness to her. They walked together along the bare, whitewashed corridors.

"Would it be asking too much of you to register the parcel when you arrive at Marseilles?" said the Superior.

"Of course I'll do that," said Kitty.

She glanced at the address. The name seemed very grand, but the place mentioned attracted her attention.

"But that is one of the *châteaux* I've seen. I was motoring with friends in France."

"It is very possible," said the Mother Superior. "Strangers are permitted to view it on two days a week."

"I think if I had ever lived in such a beautiful place I should never have had the courage to leave it."

"It is of course a historical monument. It is scarcely intimate. If I regretted anything it would not be that, but the little *château* that we lived in when I was a child. It was in the Pyrenees. I was born within sound of the sea. I do not deny that sometimes I should like to hear the waves beating against the rocks."

Kitty had an idea that the Mother Superior, divining her thought and the reason for her remarks, was slyly making fun of her. But they reached the little, unpretentious door of the convent. To Kitty's surprise the Mother Superior took her in her arms and kissed her. The pressure of her pale lips on Kitty's cheeks—she kissed her first on one side and then on the other—was so unexpected that it made her flush and inclined to cry.

"Good-bye, God bless you, my dear child." She held her for a moment in her arms. "Remember that it is nothing to do your duty; that is demanded of you and is no more meritorious than to wash your hands when they are dirty; the only thing that counts is the love of duty; when love and duty are one, then grace is in you and you will enjoy a happiness which passes all understanding."

The convent door closed for the last time behind her.

CHAPTER LXIX

WADDINGTON walked with Kitty up the hill and they turned aside for a moment to look at Walter's grave; at the memorial arch he said good-bye to her, and looking at it for the last time she felt that she could reply to the enigmatic irony of its appearance with an equal irony of her own. She stepped into her chair.

One day passed after the other. The sights of the wayside served as a background to her thoughts. She saw them as it were

in duplicate, rounded as though in a stereoscope, with an added significance because to everything she saw was added the recollection of what she had seen when but a few short weeks before she had taken the same journey in the contrary direction. The coolies with their loads straggled disorderly, two or three together, and then, a hundred yards behind, one by himself, and then two or three more; the soldiers of the escort shuffled along with a clumsy walk that covered five and twenty miles a day; the amah was carried by two bearers, and Kitty, not because she was heavier, but for face' sake, by four. Now and then they met a string of coolies lolloping by in line with their heavy burdens, now and then a Chinese official in a sedan who looked at the white woman with inquisitive eyes; now they came across peasants in faded blue and huge hats on their way to market and now a woman, old or young, tottering along on her bound feet. They passed up and down little hills laid out with trim rice-fields and farmhouses nestling cosily in a grove of bamboos; they passed through ragged villages and populous cities walled like the cities in a missal. The sun of the early autumn was pleasant, and if at daybreak, when the shimmering dawn lent the neat fields the enchantment of a fairy tale, it was cold, the warmth later was very grateful. Kitty was filled by it with a sense of beatitude which she made no effort to resist.

The vivid scenes with their elegant colour, their unexpected distinction, and their strangeness, were like an arras before which, like mysterious, shadowy shapes, played the phantoms of Kitty's fancy. They seemed wholly unreal. Mei-tan-fu with its crenellated walls was like the painted canvas placed on the stage in an old play to represent a city. The nuns, Waddington, and the Manchu woman who loved him, were fantastic characters in a masque; and the rest, the people sidling along the tortuous streets and those who died, were nameless supers. Of course it had, they all had, a significance of some sort, but what was it? It was as though they performed a ritual dance, elaborate and ancient, and you knew that those complicated measures had a meaning which it was important for you to know; and yet you could see no clue, no clue.

It seemed incredible to Kitty (an old woman was passing along the causeway, in blue, and the blue in the sunshine was like lapis lazuli; her face with its thousand little wrinkles was like a mask of old ivory; and she leaned, as she walked on her tiny feet, on a long black staff) it seemed incredible to Kitty that she and Walter had taken part in that strange and unreal dance. They had played

important parts too. She might easily have lost her life: he had. Was it a joke? Perhaps it was nothing but a dream from which she would suddenly awake with a sigh of relief. It seemed to have taken place a long time ago and in a far-off place. It was singular how shadowy the persons of that play seemed against the sunny background of real life. And now it seemed to Kitty like a story that she was reading; it was a little startling that it seemed to concern her so little. She found already that she could not recall with distinctness Waddington's face which had been so familiar to her.

This evening they should reach the city on the Western River from which she was to take the steamer. Thence it was but a night's run to Hong-Kong.

CHAPTER LXX

AT first because she had not wept when Walter died she was ashamed. It seemed dreadfully callous. Why, the eyes of the Chinese officer, Colonel Yü, had been wet with tears. She was dazed by her husband's death. It was difficult to understand that he would not come into the bungalow again and that when he got up in the morning she would not hear him take his bath in the Suchow tub. He was alive and now he was dead. The sisters wondered at her Christian resignation and admired the courage with which she bore her loss. But Waddington was shrewd; for all his grave sympathy she had a feeling that—how should she put it?—that he had his tongue in his cheek. Of course, Walter's death had been a shock to her. She didn't want him to die. But after all she didn't love him, she had never loved him; it was decent to bear herself with becoming sorrow; it would be ugly and vulgar even to let anyone see in her heart; but she had gone through too much to make pretences to herself. It seemed to her that this at least the last few weeks had taught her, that if it is necessary sometimes to lie to others it is always despicable to lie to oneself. She was sorry that Walter had died in that tragic manner, but she was sorry with a purely human sorrow such as she might have felt if it had been an acquaintance. She would acknowledge that Walter had admirable qualities; it just happened that she did not like him; he had always bored her. She would not admit that

his death was a relief to her, she could say honestly that if by a word of hers she could bring him back to life she would say it, but she could not resist the feeling that his death made her way to some extent a trifle easier. They would never have been happy together and yet to part would have been terribly difficult. She was startled at herself for feeling as she did; she supposed that people would think her heartless and cruel if they knew. Well, they shouldn't know. She wondered if all her fellows had in their hearts shameful secrets which they spent their time guarding from curious glances.

She looked very little into the future and she made no plans. The only thing she knew was that she wanted to stay in Hong-Kong as short a while as might be. She looked forward to arriving there with horror. It seemed to her that she would like to wander for ever through that smiling and friendly country in her rattan chair, and, an indifferent spectator for ever of the phantasmagoria of life, pass each night under a different roof. But of course the immediate future must be faced: she would go to the hotel when she reached Hong-Kong, she would arrange about getting rid of the house and selling the furniture; there would be no need to see Townsend. He would have the grace to keep out of her way. She would like, all the same, to see him once more in order to tell him what a despicable creature she thought him.

But what did Charles Townsend matter?

Like a rich melody on a harp that rang in exultant arpeggios through the complicated harmonies of a symphony, one thought beat in her heart insistently. It was this thought which gave their exotic beauty to the rice-fields, which made a little smile break on her pale lips as a smooth-faced lad swung past her on his way to the market town with exultation in his carriage and audacity in his eyes, and which gave the magic of a tumultuous life to the cities she passed through. The city of the pestilence was a prison from which she was escaped, and she had never known before how exquisite was the blueness of the sky and what a joy there was in the bamboo copses that leaned with such an adorable grace across the causeway. Freedom! That was the thought that sung in her heart so that even though the future was so dim, it was iridescent like the mist over the river where the morning sun fell upon it. Freedom! Not only freedom from a bond that irked, and a companionship which depressed her; freedom, not only from the death which had threatened, but freedom from the love that had

degraded her; freedom from all spiritual ties, the freedom of a disembodied spirit; and with freedom, courage and a valiant unconcern for whatever was to come.

CHAPTER LXXI

WHEN the boat docked at Hong-Kong, Kitty, who had been standing on deck to look at the coloured, gay and vivacious traffic of the river, went into her cabin to see that the amah had left nothing behind. She gave herself a look in the glass. She wore black—the nuns had dyed a dress for her—but not mourning; and the thought crossed her mind that the first thing she must do was to see to this. The habiliments of woe could not but serve as an effective disguise to her unexpected feelings. There was a knock on her cabin door. The amah opened it.

"Mrs. Fane."

Kitty turned round and saw a face which at the first moment she did not recognise. Then her heart gave a sudden quick beat and she flushed. It was Dorothy Townsend. Kitty so little expected to see her that she knew neither what to do nor what to say. But Mrs. Townsend came into the cabin and with an impulsive gesture took Kitty in her arms.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, I'm so dreadfully sorry for you."

Kitty allowed herself to be kissed. She was a little surprised at this effusiveness in a woman whom she had always thought cold and distant.

"It's very kind of you," murmured Kitty.

"Come on deck. The amah will look after your things and my boys are here."

She took Kitty's hand, and Kitty, allowing herself to be led, noticed that her good-natured, weather-beaten face bore an expression of real concern.

"Your boat's early, I very nearly didn't get down in time," said Mrs. Townsend. "I couldn't have borne it if I'd missed you."

"But you didn't come to meet me?" exclaimed Kitty.

"Of course I did."

"But how did you know I was coming?"

"Mr. Waddington sent me a telegram."

Kitty turned away. She had a lump in her throat. It was funny

that a little unexpected kindness should so affect her. She did not want to cry; she wished Dorothy Townsend would go away. But Dorothy took the hand that was hanging by Kitty's side and pressed it. It embarrassed Kitty that this shy woman should be so demonstrative.

"I want you to do me a great favour. Charlie and I want you to come and stay with us while you're in Hong-Kong."

Kitty snatched her hand away.

"It's awfully kind of you. I couldn't possibly."

"But you must. You can't go and live all by yourself in your own house. It would be dreadful for you. I've prepared everything. You shall have your own sitting-room. You can have your meals there if you don't care to have them with us. We both want you to come."

"I wasn't thinking of going to the house. I was going to get myself a room at the Hong-Kong Hotel. I couldn't possibly put you to so much trouble."

The suggestion had taken her by surprise. She was confused and vexed. If Charlie had had any sense of decency he would never have allowed his wife to make the invitation. She did not wish to be under an obligation to either of them.

"Oh, but I couldn't bear the idea of your living at a hotel. And you'd hate the Hong-Kong Hotel just now. With all those people about and the band playing jazz all the time. Please say you'll come to us. I promise you that Charlie and I won't bother you."

"I don't know why you should be so kind to me." Kitty was getting a little short of excuses; she could not bring herself to utter a blunt and definite no. "I'm afraid I'm not very good company among strangers just now."

"But need we be strangers to you? Oh, I do so want not to be, I so want you to allow me to be your friend." Dorothy clasped her hands and her voice, her cool, deliberate and distinguished voice, was tremulous with tears. "I so awfully want you to come. You see, I want to make amends to you."

Kitty did not understand. She did not know what amends Charlie's wife owed her.

"I'm afraid I didn't very much like you at first. I thought you rather fast. You see, I'm old-fashioned and I suppose I'm intolerant."

Kitty gave her a passing glance. What she meant was that at first she had thought Kitty vulgar. Though Kitty allowed no shadow

of it to show on her face in her heart she laughed. Much she cared for what anyone thought of her now!

"And when I heard that you'd gone with your husband into the jaws of death, without a moment's hesitation, I felt such a frightful cad. I felt so humiliated. You've been so wonderful, you've been so brave, you make all the rest of us look so dreadfully cheap and second-rate." Now the tears were pouring down her kind, homely face. "I can't tell you how much I admire you and what a respect I have for you. I know I can do nothing to make up for your terrible loss, but I want you to know how deeply, how sincerely I feel for you. And if you'll only allow me to do a little something for you it will be a privilege. Don't bear me a grudge because I misjudged you. You're heroic and I'm just a silly fool of a woman."

Kitty looked down at the deck. She was very pale. She wished that Dorothy would not show such uncontrollable emotion. She was touched, it was true, but she could not help a slight feeling of impatience that this simple creature should believe such lies.

"If you really mean that you'd like to have me, of course I shall be glad to come," she sighed.

CHAPTER LXXII

THE Townsends lived on the Peak in a house with a wide view over the sea, and Charlie did not as a rule come up to luncheon, but on the day of Kitty's arrival Dorothy (they were Kitty and Dorothy to one another by now) told her that if she felt up to seeing him he would like to come and bid her welcome. Kitty reflected that since she must see him she might just as well see him at once and she looked forward with grim amusement to the embarrassment she must cause him. She saw very well that the invitation to stay had arisen in his wife's fancy and notwithstanding his own feelings he had immediately approved. Kitty knew how great his desire was always to do the right thing, and to offer her a gracious hospitality was obviously very much the right thing. But he could hardly remember that last interview of theirs without mortification: to a man so vain as Townsend it must be galling like an ulcer that would not heal. She hoped that she had hurt him as much as he had hurt her. He must hate her now. She was glad to think that she did not hate, but only despised him. It gave her a sardonic

satisfaction to reflect that whatever his feelings he would be obliged to make much of her. When she left his office that afternoon he must have hoped with all his heart that he would never set eyes on her again.

And now, sitting with Dorothy, she waited for him to come in. She was conscious of her delight in the sober luxury of the drawing-room. She sat in an arm-chair, there were lovely flowers here and there, on the walls were pleasing pictures; the room was shaded and cool, it was friendly and homelike. She remembered with a faint shudder the bare and empty parlour of the missionary's bungalow; the rattan chairs and the kitchen table with its cotton cloth, the stained shelves with all those cheap editions of novels, and the little skimpy red curtains that had such a dusty look. Oh, it had been so uncomfortable! She supposed that Dorothy had never thought of that.

They heard a motor drive up, and Charlie strode into the room.

"Am I late? I hope I haven't kept you waiting. I had to see the Governor and I simply couldn't get away."

He went up to Kitty, and took both her hands.

"I'm so very, very glad you've come here. I know Dorothy has told you that we want you to stay as long as ever you like and that we want you to look upon our house as your home. But I want to tell you so myself as well. If there's anything in the world I can do for you I shall only be too happy." His eyes wore a charming expression of sincerity; she wondered if he saw the irony in hers. "I'm awfully stupid at saying some things and I don't want to seem a clumsy fool, but I do want you to know how deeply I sympathise with you in your husband's death. He was a thundering good chap, and he'll be missed here more than I can say."

"Don't, Charlie," said his wife. "I'm sure Kitty understands. . . Here are the cocktails."

Following the luxurious custom of the foreigners in China two boys in uniform came into the room with savouries and cocktails. Kitty refused.

"Oh, you must have one," insisted Townsend in his breezy, cordial way. "It'll do you good and I'm sure you haven't had such a thing as a cocktail since you left Hong-Kong. Unless I'm very much mistaken you couldn't get ice at Mei-tan-fu."

"You're not mistaken," said Kitty.

For a moment she had a picture before her mind's eye of that beggar with the tousled head in the blue rags through which

you saw the emaciated limbs, who had lain dead against the compound wall.

CHAPTER LXXIII

THEY went in to luncheon. Charlie, sitting at the head of his table, easily took charge of the conversation. After those first few words of sympathy he treated Kitty, not as though she had just suffered a devastating experience, but rather as though she had come in from Shanghai for a change after an operation for appendicitis. She needed cheering and he was prepared to cheer her. The best way of making her feel at home was to treat her as one of the family. He was a tactful man. He began talking of the autumn race-meeting, and the polo—by Jove, he would have to give up playing polo if he couldn't get his weight down—and a chat he had had that morning with the Governor. He spoke of a party they had been to on the Admiral's flag-ship, the state of affairs in Canton, and of the links at Lushan. In a few minutes Kitty felt that she might have been away for no longer than a week-end. It was incredible that over there, up-country, six hundred miles away only (the distance from London to Edinburgh, wasn't it?) men, women and children had been dying like flies. Soon she found herself asking about so-and-so who had broken a collar-bone at polo and if Mrs. This had gone home or Mrs. That was playing in the tennis tournament. Charlie made his little jokes and she smiled at them. Dorothy with her faint air of superiority (which now included Kitty and so was no longer slightly offensive, but a bond of union rather) was gently ironic about various persons in the colony. Kitty began to feel more alert.

"Why, she's looking better already," said Charlie to his wife. "She was so pale before tiffin that I was quite startled; she's really got some colour in her cheeks now."

But while she took her part in the conversation, if not with gaiety (for she felt that neither Dorothy nor Charlie with his admirable sense of decorum would approve of that) at least with cheerfulness, Kitty observed her host. In all those weeks during which her fancy had been revengefully occupied with him she had built up in her mind a very vivid impression of him. His thick curling hair was a little too long and too carefully brushed, in

order to hide the fact that it was greying there was too much oil on it; his face was too red, with its network of mauve veins on the cheeks, and his jowl was too massive: when he did not hold his head up to hide it you saw that he had a double chin; and there was something apelike in those bushy, grizzled eyebrows of his that vaguely disgusted her. He was heavy in his movements, and all the care he took in his diet and all his exercise did not prevent him from being fat; his bones were much too well covered and his joints had a middle-aged stiffness. His smart clothes were a little tight for him and a little too young.

But when he came into the drawing-room before luncheon Kitty received quite a shock (this perhaps was why her pallor had been so marked), for she discovered that her imagination had played an odd trick on her: he did not in the least look as she had pictured him. She could hardly help laughing at herself. His hair was not grey at all—oh, there were a few white hairs on the temple, but they were becoming; and his face was not red, but sunburned; his head was very well placed on his neck; and he wasn't stout and he wasn't old: in fact he was almost slim and his figure was admirable—could you blame him if he was a trifle vain of it?—he might have been a young man. And of course he did know how to wear his clothes; it was absurd to deny that: he looked neat and clean and trim. Whatever could have possessed her to think him this and that? He was a very handsome man. It was lucky that she knew how worthless he was. Of course she had always admitted that his voice had a winning quality, and his voice was exactly as she remembered it: it made the falseness of every word he said more exasperating; its richness of tone and its warmth rang now in her ears with insincerity and she wondered how she could ever have been taken in by it. His eyes were beautiful: that was where his charm lay, they had such a soft, blue brilliance and even when he was talking balderdash an expression which was so delightful; it was almost impossible not to be moved by them.

At last the coffee was brought in and Charlie lit his cheroot. He looked at his watch and rose from the table.

"Well, I must leave you two young women to your own devices. It's time for me to get back to the office." He paused and then with his friendly, charming eyes on Kitty said to her: "I'm not going to bother you for a day or two till you're rested, but then I want to have a little business talk with you."

"With me?"

"We must make arrangements about your house, you know, and then there's the furniture."

"Oh, but I can go to a lawyer. There's no reason why I should bother you about that."

"Don't think for a moment I'm going to let you waste your money on legal expenses. I'm going to see to everything. You know you're entitled to a pension: I'm going to talk to H.E. about it and see if by making representations in the proper quarter we can't get something extra for you. You put yourself in my hands. But don't bother about anything just yet. All we want you to do now is to get fit and well: isn't that right, Dorothy?"

"Of course."

He gave Kitty a little nod and then passing by his wife's chair took her hand and kissed it. Most Englishmen look a little foolish when they kiss a woman's hand; he did it with a graceful ease.

CHAPTER LXXIV

It was not till Kitty was fairly settled at the Townsends that she discovered that she was weary. The comfort and the unaccustomed amenity of this life broke up the strain under which she had been living. She had forgotten how pleasant it was to take one's ease, how lulling to be surrounded by pretty things, and how agreeable it was to receive attention. She sank back with a sigh of relief into the facile existence of the luxurious East. It was not displeasing to feel that in a discreet and well-bred fashion she was an object of sympathetic interest. Her bereavement was so recent that it was impossible for entertainments to be given for her, but ladies of consequence in the Colony (His Excellency's wife, the wives of the Admiral and of the Chief Justice) came to drink a quiet cup of tea with her. His Excellency's wife said that His Excellency was most anxious to see her and if she would come very quietly to luncheon at Government House ("not a party, of course, only ourselves and the A.D.C.s!"), it would be very nice. These ladies used Kitty as though she were a piece of porcelain which was as fragile as it was precious. She could not fail to see that they looked upon her as a little heroine, and she had sufficient humour to play the part with modesty and discretion. She wished sometimes that Waddington were there; with his malicious

shrewdness he would have seen the fun of the situation; and when alone they might have had a good laugh over it together. Dorothy had had a letter from him, and he had said all manner of things about her devoted work at the convent, about her courage and her self-control. Of course he was skilfully pulling their legs: the dirty dog.

CHAPTER LXXV

KIRRY did not know whether it was by chance or by design that she never found herself for a moment alone with Charlie. His tact was exquisite. He remained kindly, sympathetic, pleasant and amiable. No one could have guessed that they had ever been more than acquaintances. But one afternoon when she was lying on a sofa outside her room reading he passed along the veranda and stopped.

"What is that you're reading?" he asked.

"A book."

She looked at him with irony. He smiled.

"Dorothy's gone to a garden-party at Government House."

"I know. Why haven't you gone too?"

"I didn't feel I could face it and I thought I'd come back and keep you company. The car's outside, would you like to come for a drive round the island?"

"No, thank you."

He sat down on the foot of the sofa on which she lay.

"We haven't had the chance of a talk by ourselves since you got here."

She looked straight into his eyes with cool insolence.

"Do you think we have anything to say to one another?"

"Volumes."

She shifted her feet a little so that she should not touch him.

"Are you still angry with me?" he asked, the shadow of a smile on his lips and his eyes melting.

"Not a bit," she laughed.

"I don't think you'd laugh if you weren't."

"You're mistaken; I despise you much too much to be angry with you."

He was unruffled.

"I think you're rather hard on me. Looking back calmly, don't you honestly think I was right?"

"From your standpoint."

"Now that you know Dorothy, you must admit she's rather nice?"

"Of course. I shall always be grateful for her great kindness to me."

"She's one in a thousand. I should never have had a moment's peace if we'd bolted. It would have been a rotten trick to play on her. And after all I had to think of my children; it would have been an awful handicap for them."

For a minute she held him in her reflective gaze. She felt completely mistress of the situation.

"I've watched you very carefully during the week I've been here. I've come to the conclusion that you really are fond of Dorothy. I should never have thought you capable of it."

"I told you I was fond of her. I wouldn't do anything to cause her a moment's uneasiness. She's the best wife a man ever had."

"Have you never thought that you owed her any loyalty?"

"What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve for," he smiled.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"You're despicable."

"I'm human. I don't know why you should think me such a cad because I fell head over ears in love with you. I didn't particularly want to, you know."

It gave her a little twist of the heart-strings to hear him say that.

"I was fair game," she answered bitterly.

"Naturally I couldn't foresee that we were going to get into such a devil of a scrape."

"And in any case you had a pretty shrewd idea that if anyone suffered it wouldn't be you."

"I think that's a bit thick. After all, now it's all over, you must see I acted for the best for both of us. You lost your head and you ought to be jolly glad that I kept mine. Do you think it would have been a success if I'd done what you wanted me to? We were dashed uncomfortable in the frying-pan, but we should have been a damned sight worse off in the fire. And you haven't come to any harm. Why can't we kiss and make friends?"

She almost laughed.

"You can hardly expect me to forget that you sent me to almost certain death without a shadow of compunction?"

"Oh, what nonsense! I told you there was no risk if you took reasonable precautions. Do you think I'd have let you go for a moment if I hadn't been perfectly convinced of that?"

"You were convinced because you wanted to be. You're one of those cowards who only think what it's profitable for them to think."

"Well, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. You have come back, and if you don't mind my saying anything so objectionable you've come back prettier than ever."

"And Walter?"

He could not resist the facetious answer which came to his mind. Charlie smiled.

"Nothing suits you so well as black."

She stared at him for a moment. Tears filled her eyes and she began to cry. Her beautiful face was distorted with grief. She did not seek to hide it, but lay on her back with her hands along her sides.

"For God's sake don't cry like that. I didn't mean to say anything unkind. It was only a joke. You know how sincerely I feel for you in your bereavement."

"Oh, hold your stupid tongue!"

"I'd give anything to have Walter back again."

"He died because of you and me."

He took her hand, but she snatched it away from him.

"Please go away," she sobbed. "That's the only thing you can do for me now. I hate and despise you. Walter was worth ten of you and I was too big a fool to see it. Go away. Go away!"

She saw he was going to speak again and she sprang to her feet and went into her room. He followed her, and as he entered, with instinctive prudence, drew the shutter so that they were almost in darkness.

"I can't leave you like this," he said, putting his arms round her. "You know I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Don't touch me. For God's sake go. Go away."

She tried to tear herself from him, but he would not let her. She was crying hysterically now.

"Darling, don't you know that I've always loved you?" he said in his deep, charming voice. "I love you more than ever."

"How can you tell such lies! Let me go. Damn you, let me go!"

"Don't be unkind to me, Kitty. I know I've been a brute to you, but forgive me."

She was shaking and sobbing, struggling to get away from him, but the pressure of his arms was strangely comforting. She had so longed to feel them round her once more, just once, and all her body trembled. She felt dreadfully weak. It seemed as though her bones were melting, and the sorrow she felt for Walter shifted into pity for herself.

"Oh, how could you be so unkind to me?" she sobbed. "Don't you know that I loved you with all my heart? No one has ever loved you as I loved you."

"Darling."

He began to kiss her.

"No, no," she cried.

He sought her face, but she turned it away; he sought her lips; she did not know what he was saying, broken, passionate words of love; and his arms held her so firmly that she felt like a child that has been lost and now at last is safe at home. She moaned faintly. Her eyes were closed and her face was wet with tears. And then he found her lips and the pressure of his upon them shot through her body like the flame of God. It was an ecstasy and she was burnt to a cinder and she glowed as though she were transfigured. In her dreams, in her dreams she had known this rapture. What was he doing with her now? She did not know. She was not a woman, her personality was dissolved, she was nothing but desire. He lifted her off her feet, she was very light in his arms, he carried her and she clung to him, desperate and adoring; her head sank on the pillow and his lips clung to hers.

CHAPTER LXXVI

SHE sat on the edge of the bed hiding her face with her hands.

"Would you like a drop of water?"

She shook her head. He went over to the washing-stand, filled the tooth-glass and brought it to her.

"Come along, have a little drink and you'll feel better."

He put the glass to her lips and she sipped the water. Then, with horrified eyes, she stared at him. He was standing over her, looking down, and in his eyes was a twinkle of self-satisfaction.

"Well, do you think I'm such a dirty dog as you did?" he asked.

She looked down

"Yes. But I know that I'm not a bit better than you. Oh, I'm so ashamed."

"Well, I think you're very ungrateful."

"Will you go now?"

"To tell you the truth I think it's about time. I'll just go and tidy up before Dorothy comes in."

He went out of the room with a jaunty step.

Kitty sat for a while, still on the edge of the bed, hunched up like an imbecile. Her mind was vacant. A shudder passed through her. She staggered to her feet and, going to the dressing-table, sank into a chair. She stared at herself in the glass. Her eyes were swollen with tears; her face was stained and there was a red mark on one cheek where his had rested. She looked at herself with horror. It was the same face. She had expected in it she knew not what change of degradation.

"Swine," she flung at her reflection. "Swine!"

Then, letting her face fall on her arms, she wept bitterly. Shame, shame! She did not know what had come over her. It was horrible. She hated him and she hated herself. It had been ecstasy. Oh, hateful! She could never look him in the face again. He was so justified. He had been right not to marry her, for she was worthless; she was no better than a harlot. Oh, worse, for those poor women gave themselves for bread. And in this house too into which Dorothy had taken her in her sorrow and cruel desolation! Her shoulders shook with her sobs. Everything was gone now. She had thought herself changed, she had thought herself strong, she thought she had returned to Hong-Kong a woman who possessed herself; new ideas flitted about her heart like little yellow butterflies in the sunshine and she had hoped to be so much better in the future; freedom like a spirit of light had beckoned her on, and the world was like a spacious plain through which she could walk light of foot and with head erect. She had thought herself free from lust and vile passions, free to live the clean and healthy life of the spirit; she had likened herself to the white egrets that fly with leisurely flight across the rice-fields at dusk and they are like the soaring thoughts of a mind at rest with itself; and she was a slave. Weak, weak! It was hopeless, it was no good to try, she was a slut.

She would not go in to dinner. She sent the boy to tell Dorothy that she had a headache and preferred to remain in her room. Dorothy came in and, seeing her red, swollen eyes, talked for a

little in her gentle, commiserating way of trivial things. Kitty knew that Dorothy thought she had been crying on account of Walter and, sympathising like the good and loving wife she was, respected the natural sorrow.

"I know it's very hard, dear," she said as she left Kitty. "But you must try to have courage. I'm sure your dear husband wouldn't wish you to grieve for him."

CHAPTER LXXVII

BUT next morning Kitty rose early and leaving a note for Dorothy to say that she was gone out on business took a tram down the hill. She made her way through the crowded streets with their motor-cars, rickshaws and chairs, and the motley throng of Europeans and Chinese, to the offices of the P. & O. Company. A ship was sailing in two days, the first ship out of the port, and she had made up her mind that at all costs she must go on it. When the clerk told her that every berth was booked she asked to see the chief agent. She sent in her name, and the agent, whom she had met before, came out to fetch her into his office. He knew her circumstances and when she told him what she wished he sent for the passenger list. He looked at it with perplexity.

"I beseech you to do what you can for me," she urged him.

"I don't think there's anyone in the Colony who wouldn't do anything in the world for you, Mrs. Fane," he answered.

He sent for a clerk and made enquiries. Then he nodded.

"I'm going to shift one or two people. I know you want to get home and I think we ought to do our best for you. I can give you a little cabin to yourself. I expect you'd prefer that."

She thanked him. She left him with an elated heart. Flight: that was her only thought. Flight! She sent a cable to her father to announce her immediate return—she had already cabled to him to say that Walter was dead; and then went back again to the Townsends to tell Dorothy what she had done.

"We shall be dreadfully sorry to lose you," the kind creature said, "but of course I understand that you want to be with your mother and father."

Since her return to Hong-Kong Kitty had hesitated from day to day to go to her house. She dreaded entering it again and meeting

face-to-face the recollections with which it was peopled. But now she had no alternative. Townsend had arranged for the sale of the furniture and he had found someone eager to take on the lease, but there were all her clothes and Walter's, for they had taken next to nothing to Mei-tan-fu, and there were books, photographs, and various odds and ends. Kitty, indifferent to everything and anxious to cut herself off completely from the past, realised that it would outrage the susceptibilities of the Colony if she allowed these things to go with the rest to an auction-room. They must be packed and sent to her. So after tiffin she prepared to go to the house. Dorothy, eager to give her help, offered to accompany her, but Kitty begged to be allowed to go alone. She agreed that two of Dorothy's boys should come and assist in the packing.

The house had been left in charge of the head boy and he opened the door for Kitty. It was curious to go into her own house as though she were a stranger. It was neat and clean. Everything was in its place, ready for her use, but although the day was warm and sunny there was about the silent rooms a chill and desolate air. The furniture was stiffly arranged, exactly where it should be, and the vases which should have held flowers were in their places; the book which Kitty had laid face downwards, she did not remember when, still lay face downwards. It was as though the house had been left empty but a minute before and yet that minute was fraught with eternity, so that you could not imagine that ever again that house would echo with talk and resound with laughter. On the piano the open music of a foxtrot seemed to wait to be played, but you had a feeling that if you struck the keys no sound would come. Walter's room was as tidy as when he was there. On the chest of drawers were two large photographs of Kitty, one in her presentation dress and one in her wedding-gown.

But the boys fetched up the trunks from the box-room and she stood over them watching them pack. They packed neatly and quickly. Kitty reflected that in the two days she had it would be easy to get everything done. She must not let herself think; she had no time for that. Suddenly she heard a step behind her and turning round saw Charles Townsend. She felt a sudden chill at her heart.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Will you come into your sitting-room? I have something to say to you."

"I'm very busy."

"I shall only keep you five minutes."

She said no more, but, with a word to the boys to go on with what they were doing, preceded Charles into the next room. She did not sit down, in order to show him that she expected him not to detain her. She knew that she was very pale and her heart was beating fast, but she faced him coolly, with hostile eyes.

"What is it you want?"

"I've just heard from Dorothy that you're going the day after to-morrow. She told me that you'd come here to do your packing and she asked me to ring up and find out if there was anything I could do for you."

"I'm grateful to you, but I can manage quite well by myself."

"So I imagined. I didn't come here to ask you that. I came to ask if your sudden departure is due to what happened yesterday."

"You and Dorothy have been very good to me. I didn't wish you to think I was taking advantage of your good-nature."

"That's not a very straight answer."

"What does it matter to you?"

"It matters a great deal. I shouldn't like to think that anything I'd done had driven you away."

She was standing at the table. She looked down. Her eyes fell on the *Sketch*. It was months old now. It was that paper which Walter had stared at all through the terrible evening when—and Walter now was . . . She raised her eyes.

"I feel absolutely degraded. You can't possibly despise me as much as I despise myself."

"But I don't despise you. I meant every word that I said yesterday. What's the good of running away like this? I don't know why we can't be good friends. I hate the idea of your thinking I've treated you badly."

"Why couldn't you leave me alone?"

"Hang it all, I'm not a stick or a stone. It's so unreasonable, the way you look at it; it's so morbid. I thought after yesterday you'd feel a little more kindly to me. After all, we're only human."

"I don't feel human. I feel like an animal. A pig or a rabbit or a dog. Oh, I don't blame you, I was just as bad. I yielded to you because I wanted you. But it wasn't the real me. I'm not that hateful, beastly, lustful woman. I disown her. It wasn't me that lay on that bed panting for you when my husband was hardly cold in his grave and your wife had been so kind to me, so indescribably kind. It was only the animal in me, dark and fearful like an evil

spirit, and I disown, and hate, and despise it. And ever since, when I've thought of it, my gorge rises and I feel that I must vomit."

He frowned a little and gave a short, uneasy snigger.

"Well, I'm fairly broad-minded, but sometimes you say things that positively shock me."

"I should be sorry to do that. You'd better go now. You're a very unimportant little man and I'm silly to talk to you seriously."

He did not answer for a while and she saw by the shadow in his blue eyes that he was angry with her. He would have a sigh of relief when, tactful and courteous as ever, he had finally seen her off. It amused her to think of the politeness with which, while they shook hands and he wished her a pleasant journey, she would thank him for his hospitality. But she saw his expression change.

"Dorothy tells me you're going to have a baby," he said.

She felt herself colour, but she allowed no gesture to escape her.

"I am."

"Am I by any chance the father?"

"No, no. It's Walter's child."

She spoke with an emphasis which she could not prevent, but even as she spoke she knew that it was not the tone with which to carry conviction.

"Are you sure?" He was now roguishly smiling. "After all, you were married to Walter a couple of years and nothing happened. The dates seem to fit all right. I think it's much more likely to be mine than Walter's."

"I would rather kill myself than have a child of yours."

"Oh, come now, that's nonsense. I should be awfully pleased and proud. I'd like it to be a girl, you know. I've only had boys with Dorothy. You won't be able to be in doubt very long, you know: my three kiddies are absolutely the living image of me."

He had regained his good-humour and she knew why. If the child was his, though she might never see him again, she could never entirely escape him. His power over her would reach out and he would still, obscurely but definitely, influence every day of her life.

"You really are the most vain and fatuous ass that it's ever been my bad luck to run across," she said.

CHAPTER LXXVIII

As the ship steamed into Marseilles, Kitty, looking at the rugged and beautiful outline of the coast glowing in the sunlight, on a sudden caught sight of the golden statue of the Blessed Virgin which stands upon the church of Sainte Marie de la Grace as a symbol of safety to the mariner at sea. She remembered how the Sisters of the convent at Mei-tan-fu, leaving their own land for ever, had knelt as the figure faded in the distance so that it was no more than a little golden flame in the blue sky and sought in prayer to allay the pang of separation. She clasped her hands in supplication to what power she knew not.

During the long, quiet journey she had thought incessantly of the horrible thing that had happened to her. She could not understand herself. It was so unexpected. What was it that had seized her, so that, despising him, despising him with all her heart, she had yielded passionately to Charlie's foul embrace? Rage filled her and disgust of herself obsessed her. She felt that she could never forget her humiliation. She wept. But as the distance from Hong-Kong increased she found that she was insensibly losing the vividness of her resentment. What had happened seemed to have happened in another world. She was like a person who has been stricken with sudden madness and, recovering, is distressed and ashamed at the grotesque things he vaguely remembers to have done when he was not himself. But because he knows he was not himself he feels that in his own eyes at least he can claim indulgence. Kitty thought that perhaps a generous heart might pity rather than condemn her. But she sighed as she thought how woe-fully her self-confidence had been shattered. The way had seemed to stretch before her straight and easy and now she saw that it was a tortuous way and that pitfalls awaited her. The vast spaces and the tragic and beautiful sunsets of the Indian Ocean rested her. She seemed borne then to some country where she might in freedom possess her soul. If she could only regain her self-respect at the cost of a bitter conflict, well, she must find the courage to affront it.

The future was lonely and difficult. At Port Said she had received a letter from her mother in answer to her cable. It was a long letter written in the large and fanciful writing which was taught to young ladies in her mother's youth. Its ornateness was

so neat that it gave you an impression of insincerity. Mrs. Garstin expressed her regret at Walter's death and sympathised properly with her daughter's grief. She feared that Kitty was left inadequately provided for, but naturally the Colonial Office would give her a pension. She was glad to know that Kitty was coming back to England and of course she must come and stay with her father and mother till her child was born. Then followed certain instructions that Kitty must be sure to follow and various details of her sister Doris's confinement. The little boy weighed so-and-so much and his paternal grandfather said he had never seen a finer child. Doris was expecting again and they hoped for another boy in order to make the succession to the baronetcy quite sure.

Kitty saw that the point of the letter lay in the definite date set for the invitation. Mrs. Garstin had no intention of being saddled with a widowed daughter in modest circumstances. It was singular, when she reflected how her mother had idolised her, that now, disappointed in her, she found her merely a nuisance. How strange was the relation between parents and children! When they were small the parents doted on them, passed through agonies of apprehension at each childish ailment, and the children clung to their parents with love and adoration; a few years passed, the children grew up, and persons not of their kin were more important to their happiness than father or mother. Indifference displaced the blind and instinctive love of the past. Their meetings were a source of boredom and irritation. Distracted once at the thought of a month's separation they were able now to look forward with equanimity to being parted for years. Her mother need not worry; as soon as she could she would make herself a home of her own. But she must have a little time; at present everything was vague and she could not form any picture of the future: perhaps she would die in childbirth; that would be a solution of many difficulties.

But when they docked two letters were handed to her. She was surprised to recognise her father's writing: she did not remember that he had ever written to her. He was not effusive, and began, "Dear Kitty". He told her that he was writing instead of her mother who had not been well and was obliged to go into a nursing home to have an operation. Kitty was not to be frightened and was to keep to her intention of going round by sea; it was much more expensive to come across by land and with her mother away it would be inconvenient for Kitty to stay at the house in Harrington

Gardens. The other was from Doris and it started, "Kitty darling": not because Doris had any particular affection for her, but because it was her way thus to address everyone she knew.

Kitty darling,

I expect Father has written to you. Mother has got to have an operation. It appears that she has been rotten for the last year, but you know she hates doctors and she's been taking all sorts of patent medicines. I don't quite know what's the matter with her as she insists on making a secret of the whole thing and flies into a passion if you ask her questions. She has been looking simply awful and if I were you I think I'd get off at Marseilles and come back as quick as you can. But don't let on that I told you to come as she pretends there's nothing much the matter with her and she doesn't want you to get here till she's back at home. She's made the doctors promise that she shall be moved in a week. Best love.

Doris.

I'm awfully sorry about Walter. You must have had a hell of a time, poor darling. I'm simply dying to see you. It's rather funny our both having babies together. We shall be able to hold one another's hands.

Kitty, lost in reflection, stood for a little while on the deck. She could not imagine her mother ill. She never remembered to have seen her other than active and resolute; she had always been impatient of other people's ailments. Then a steward came up to her with a telegram.

Deeply regret to inform you that your mother died this morning..
Father.

CHAPTER LXXIX

KITTY rang the bell at the house in Harrington Gardens. She was told that her father was in his study and going to the door she opened it softly: he was sitting by the fire reading the last edition of the evening paper. He looked up as she entered, put down the paper, and sprang nervously to his feet.

"Oh, Kitty, I didn't expect you till the later train."

"I thought you wouldn't want the bother of coming to meet me so I didn't wire the time I expected to arrive."

He gave her his cheek to kiss in the manner she so well remembered.

"I was just having a look at the paper," he said. "I haven't read the paper for the last two days."

She saw that he thought it needed some explanation if he occupied himself with the ordinary affairs of life.

"Of course," she said. "You must be tired out. I'm afraid mother's death has been a great shock to you."

He was older and thinner than when she had last seen him. A little, lined, dried-up man, with a precise manner.

"The surgeon said there had never been any hope. She hadn't been herself for more than a year, but she refused to see a doctor. The surgeon told me that she must have been in constant pain, he said it was a miracle that she had been able to endure it."

"Did she never complain?"

"She said she wasn't very well. But she never complained of pain." He paused and looked at Kitty. "Are you very tired after your journey?"

"Not very."

"Would you like to go up and see her?"

"Is she here?"

"Yes, she was brought here from the nursing home."

"Yes, I'll go now."

"Would you like me to come with you?"

There was something in her father's tone that made her look at him quickly. His face was slightly turned from her; he did not want her to catch his eye. Kitty had acquired of late a singular proficiency at reading the thoughts of others. After all, day after day she had applied all her sensibilities to divine from a casual word or an unguarded gesture the hidden thoughts of her husband. She guessed at once what her father was trying to hide from her. It was relief he felt, an infinite relief, and he was frightened of himself. For hard on thirty years he had been a good and faithful husband, he had never uttered a single word in dispraise of his wife, and now he should grieve for her. He had always done the things that were expected of him. It would have been shocking to him by the flicker of an eyelid or by the smallest hint to betray that he did not feel what under the circumstances a bereaved husband should feel.

"No, I would rather go by myself," said Kitty.

She went upstairs and into the large, cold and pretentious

bedroom in which her mother for so many years had slept. She remembered so well those massive pieces of mahogany and the engravings after Marcus Stone which adorned the walls. The things on the dressing-table were arranged with the stiff precision which Mrs. Garstin had all her life insisted upon. The flowers looked out of place; Mrs. Garstin would have thought it silly, affected and unhealthy to have flowers in her bedroom. Their perfume did not cover that acrid, musty smell, 'as' of freshly washed linen, which Kitty remembered as characteristic of her mother's room.

Mrs. Garstin lay on the bed, her hands folded across her breasts with a meekness which in life she would have had no patience with. With her strong sharp features, the cheeks hollow with suffering and the temples sunken, she looked handsome and even imposing. Death had robbed her face of its meanness and left only an impression of character. She might have been a Roman empress. It was strange to Kitty that of the dead persons she had seen this was the only one who in death seemed to preserve a look as though that clay had been once a habitation of the spirit. Grief she could not feel, for there had been too much bitterness between her mother and herself to leave in her heart any deep feeling of affection; and looking back on the girl she had been she knew that it was her mother who had made her what she was. But when she looked at that hard, domineering and ambitious woman who lay there so still and silent with all her petty aims frustrated by death, she was aware of a vague pathos. She had schemed and intrigued all her life and never had she desired anything but what was base and unworthy. Kitty wondered whether perhaps in some other sphere she looked upon her earthly course with consternation.

Doris came in.

"I thought you'd come by this train. I felt I must look in for a moment. Isn't it dreadful? Poor darling mother."

Bursting into tears, she flung herself into Kitty's arms. Kitty kissed her. She knew how her mother had neglected Doris in favour of her and how harsh she had been with her because she was plain and dull. She wondered whether Doris really felt the extravagant grief she showed. But Doris had always been emotional. She wished she could cry: Doris would think her dreadfully hard. Kitty felt that she had been through too much to feign a distress she did not feel.

"Would you like to come and see father?" she asked her

when the strength of the outburst had somewhat subsided.

Doris wiped her eyes. Kitty noticed that her sister's pregnancy had blunted her features and in her black dress she looked gross and blowsy.

"No, I don't think I will. I shall only cry again. Poor old thing, he's bearing it wonderfully."

Kitty showed her sister out of the house and then went back to her father. He was standing in front of the fire and the newspaper was neatly folded. He wanted her to see that he had not been reading it again.

"I haven't dressed for dinner," he said. "I didn't think it was necessary."

CHAPTER LXXX

THEY dined. Mr. Garstin gave Kitty the details of his wife's illness and death, and he told her of the kindness of the friends who had written (there were piles of sympathetic letters on his table and he sighed when he considered the burden of answering them) and of the arrangements he had made for the funeral. Then they went back into his study. This was the only room in the house which had a fire. He mechanically took from the chimney-piece his pipe and began to fill it, but he gave his daughter a doubtful look and put it down.

"Aren't you going to smoke?" she asked.

"Your mother didn't very much like the smell of a pipe after dinner and since the war I've given up cigars."

His answer gave Kitty a little pang. It seemed dreadful that a man of sixty should hesitate to smoke what he wanted in his own study.

"I like the smell of a pipe," she smiled.

A faint look of relief crossed his face and taking his pipe once more he lit it. They sat opposite one another on each side of the fire. He felt that he must talk to Kitty of her own troubles.

"You received the letter your mother wrote to you to Port Said, I suppose. The news of poor Walter's death was a great shock to both of us. I thought him a very nice fellow."

Kitty did not know what to say.

"Your mother told me that you were going to have a baby."

"Yes."

"When do you expect it?"

"In about four months."

"It will be a great consolation to you. You must go and see Doris's boy. He's a fine little fellow."

They were talking more distantly than if they were strangers who had just met, for if they had been he would have been interested in her just because of that, and curious, but their common past was a wall of indifference between them. Kitty knew too well that she had done nothing to beget her father's affection, he had never counted in the house and had been taken for granted, the breadwinner who was a little despised because he could provide no more luxuriously for his family; but she had taken for granted that he loved her just because he was her father, and it was a shock to discover that his heart was empty of feeling for her. She had known that they were all bored by him, but it had never occurred to her that he was equally bored by them. He was as ever kind and subdued, but the sad perspicacity which she had learnt in suffering suggested to her that, though he had probably never acknowledged it to himself and never would, in his heart he disliked her.

His pipe was not drawing and he rose to find something to poke it with. Perhaps it was an excuse to hide his nervousness.

"Your mother wished you to stay here till your baby was born and she was going to have your old room got ready for you."

"I know. I promise you I won't be a bother."

"Oh, it's not that. Under the circumstances it was evident that the only place for you to come to was your father's house. But the fact is that I've just been offered the post of Chief Justice of the Bahamas and I have accepted it."

"Oh, Father, I'm so glad. I congratulate you with all my heart."

"The offer arrived too late for me to tell your poor mother. It would have given her a great satisfaction."

The bitter irony of fate! After all her efforts, intrigues and humiliations, Mrs. Garstin had died without knowing that her ambition, however modified by past disappointments, was at last achieved.

"I am sailing early next month. Of course this house will be put in the agent's hands and my intention was to sell the furniture. I'm sorry that I shan't be able to have you to stay here, but if you'd like any of the furniture to furnish a flat I shall be extremely pleased to give it you."

Kitty looked into the fire. Her heart beat quickly; it was curling that on a sudden she should be so nervous. But at last she forced herself to speak. In her voice was a little tremor.

"Couldn't I come with you, Father?"

"You? Oh, my dear Kitty." His face fell. She had often heard the expression, but thought it only a phrase, and now for the first time in her life she saw the movement that it described. It was so marked that it startled her. "But all your friends are here and Doris is here. I should have thought you'd be much happier if you took a flat in London. I don't exactly know what your circumstances are, but I shall be very glad to pay the rent of it."

"I have enough money to live on."

"I'm going to a strange place. I know nothing of the conditions."

"I'm used to strange places. London means nothing to me any more. I couldn't breathe here."

He closed his eyes for a moment and she thought he was going to cry. His face bore an expression of utter misery. It wrung her heart. She had been right; the death of his wife had filled him with relief and now this chance to break entirely with the past had offered him freedom. He had seen a new life spread before him and at last after all these years rest and the mirage of happiness. She saw dimly all the suffering that had preyed on his heart for thirty years. At last he opened his eyes. He could not prevent the sigh that escaped him.

"Of course if you wish to come I shall be very pleased."

It was pitiful. The struggle had been short and he had surrendered to his sense of duty. With those few words he abandoned all his hopes. She rose from her chair and going over to him knelt down and seized his hands.

"No, Father, I won't come unless you want me. You've sacrificed yourself enough. If you want to go alone, go. Don't think of me for a minute."

He released one of her hands and stroked her pretty hair.

"Of course I want you, my dear. After all I'm your father and you're a widow and alone. If you want to be with me it would be very unkind of me not to want you."

"But that's just it, I make no claims on you because I'm your daughter, you owe me nothing."

"Oh, my dear child."

"Nothing," she repeated vehemently. "My heart sinks when I

think how we've battered on you all our lives and have given you nothing in return. Not even a little affection. I'm afraid you've not had a very happy life. Won't you let me try to make up a little for all I've failed to do in the past?"

He frowned a little. Her emotion embarrassed him.

"I don't know what you mean. I've never had any complaint to make of you."

"Oh, Father, I've been through so much, I've been so unhappy. I'm not the Kitty I was when I went away. I'm terribly weak, but I don't think I'm the filthy cad I was then. Won't you give me a chance? I have nobody but you in the world now. Won't you let me try to make you love me? Oh, Father, I'm so lonely and so miserable; I want your love so badly."

She buried her face in his lap and cried as though her heart were breaking.

"Oh, my Kitty, my little Kitty," he murmured.

She looked up and put her arms round his neck.

"Oh, Father, be kind to me. Let us be kind to one another."

He kissed her, on the lips as a lover might, and his cheeks were wet with her tears.

"Of course you shall come with me."

"Do you want me to? Do you really want me to?"

"Yes."

"I'm so grateful to you."

"Oh, my dear, don't say things like that to me. It makes me feel quite awkward."

He took out his handkerchief and dried her eyes. He smiled in a way that she had never seen him smile before. Once more she threw her arms round his neck.

"We'll have such a lark, Father dear. You don't know what fun we're going to have together."

"You haven't forgotten that you're going to have a baby."

"I'm glad she'll be born out there within sound of the sea and under a wide blue sky."

"Have you already made up your mind about the sex?" he murmured, with his thin, dry smile.

"I want a girl because I want to bring her up so that she shan't make the mistakes I've made. When I look back upon the girl I was I hate myself. But I never had a chance. I'm going to bring up my daughter so that she's free and can stand on her own feet. I'm not going to bring a child into the world, and love her, and bring

her up, just so that some man may want to sleep with her so much that he's willing to provide her with board and lodging for the rest of her life."

She felt her father stiffen. He had never spoken of such things and it shocked him to hear these words in his daughter's mouth.

"Let me be frank just this once, Father. I've been foolish and wicked and hateful. I've been terribly punished. I'm determined to save my daughter from all that. I want her to be fearless and frank. I want her to be a person, independent of others because she is possessed of herself, and I want her to take life like a free man and make a better job of it than I have."

"Why, my love, you talk as though you were fifty. You've got all your life before you. You mustn't be down-hearted."

Kitty shook her head and slowly smiled.

"I'm not. I have hope and courage."

The past was finished; let the dead bury their dead. Was that dreadfully callous? She hoped with all her heart that she had learnt compassion and charity. She could not know what the future had in store for her, but she felt in herself the strength to accept whatever was to come with a light and buoyant spirit. Then, on a sudden, for no reason that she knew of, from the depths of her unconscious arose a reminiscence of the journey they had taken, she and poor Walter, to the plague-ridden city where he had met his death: one morning they set out in their chairs while it was still dark, and as the day broke she divined rather than saw a scene of such breath-taking loveliness that for a brief period the anguish of her heart was assuaged. It reduced to insignificance all human tribulation. The sun rose, dispelling the mist, and she saw winding onwards as far as the eye could reach, among the rice-fields, across a little river and through undulating country the path they were to follow: perhaps her faults and follies, the unhappiness she had suffered, were not entirely vain if she could follow the path that now she dimly discerned before her, not the path that kind funny old Waddington had spoken of that led nowhither, but the path those dear nuns at the convent followed so humbly, the path that led to peace.

